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GALLAUDET
UNIVERSITY

THE HONORS PROGRAM

***Eyeth*:**
A Novel for the Deaf

An Honors Capstone Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

Kelsey Young's science fiction novel *Eyeth*, to use Tom Humphries' phrase, is important for deaf literature because it exemplifies "culture talking"—not the proof ("talking culture") of a monolithic culture apart from the mainstream but complex deaf life on its own terms. It also focuses on a wide range of deaf people involved in intra-deafcentric conflicts; deaf sub-groups include a range of communication preferences (speaking, cued speech, signing) as well as multiple physical differences (deaf-blind, cerebral palsy, wheelchair users) though not ethnic diversity. A critical introduction to the novel explains that science fiction allows the creation of a world that does not exist as a real physical place and allows exploration of intra-group issues that a mainstream context of oppression of all deaf people obscures. The introduction also relates a discussion of the countries on Eyeth to colonialism and post-colonialism theory to provide a framework to the reader for the subsequent analysis of how Eyeth uses but also subverts colonialist thinking through characters' actions. The novel itself is about a young man, Virgil G, training under the tutelage of the current Guardian of Eyeth, Shawn Wright, who ensures Eyeth doesn't stray from its original goals of being a deaf world.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 2
Critical Introduction 5
References 32
Appendices to Introduction 35
A. List of Characters 35
B. List of Eyeth Continents and Countries in Americana 39
Eyeth: The Novel 42
Chapter I: The Meeting 42
Chapter II: Cassie & Jody 58
Chapter III: Reflections, I 72
Chapter IV: From Clerc to Milan 83
Chapter V: From Milan to Clerc 97
Chapter VI: Reflections, II 108
Chapter VII: Start of a War 115
Chapter VIII: Reflections, III 123
Chapter IX: The Great Traitor 132
Chapter X: Reflections, IV 152
Chapter XI: Forcing the Mold 157
Chapter XII: A Troubled Youth 167
Chapter XIII: Wake-Up Calls 178
Chapter XIV: Change is Coming 194
Chapter XV: A False Eden 201
Chapter XVI: Reflections, V 221
Chapter XVII: Hero, Father. 229
Chapter XVIII: Reflections, VI 256
Chapter XIX: Return from the Underworld 271
Chapter XX: The Crowning 277

Critical Introduction

Here's a challenge for you. Can you think of any story in the English language that features deaf characters? You may be able to think of a few. Now how many of those books or stories feature hearing characters? It seems safe to assume that nearly all of them do. That's why my novel *Eyeth* is unique. All of its major characters are deaf. Unlike many other works of deaf literature, it also focuses on a wide range of deaf people, including both those who speak and those who sign.

I chose to focus on a wide range of deaf people, not just those from the Deaf culture,[1] in my novel for one main reason. People tend to associate deaf people with Deaf culture. Although a majority of people involved with Deaf culture are deaf, a few are hearing like interpreters, spouses and hearing children of Deaf parents, who are called CODAs. More important, some deaf people shun the Deaf community and instead involve themselves with other signed communities without Deaf culture norms or with spoken language communities. Furthermore, culture doesn't have to be limited to only Deaf people. Per the Merriam-Webster (2013) definition, "culture" is a set of social forms, beliefs and traits particular to a social group. People who grew up in the hearing world think and behave in different ways than those who grew up in a deaf-centric world. For an example of different behaviors between cultures, deaf people would pound on the table to get attention while hearing people would shout. This behavior could be a part of many deaf people's lives, while other behaviors are specific to particular groups of deaf people. In other words, there can be different cultures for those who are oral deaf, ASL

[1] Deaf culture includes those who use American Sign Language and take pride in their deaf identity.

deaf or deafblind. No matter the culture, people continue to live in that culture every day. But it's always better to live culture and discover new ways to expand on it than focus on proving a culture exists. Living a culture and portraying people living it is what Tom Humphries (2008, p. 41) calls "culture talking,"

My work aims to show "culture talking" in an expanded sense of the many ways deaf people live. Deaf people tend to discuss the idea of their culture rather than live it. But they need to create and expand their culture and not be focused on proving it to hearing people. Tom Humphries discusses this in his article, "Talking Culture and Culture Talking," when he writes: "Put simply, we need to move on from 'How are we different?' to 'How are we being?' (Humphries, 2008, p. 41). In other words, they're more comfortable with discussing their culture as an object for consumption by others who are not in the culture rather than looking at how they live within their culture. Unlike many other works of deaf literature, my novel has deaf people living in a world where they stand in the majority, and the conflicts involve those among different deaf people.

Also unlike other works of deaf literature, *Eyeth* is in the genre of science fiction. I used science fiction because it has been used as a vehicle to tackle issues that would be difficult to discuss in any other genre of fiction. It's critical to be able to create utopian or dystopian worlds. For example, feminist science fiction creates utopias that are "places of union, reinvention and empowerment. They nurture and embrace the Other rather than fear and fight against it. They put the Other, the Woman or the Alien in its centre and try to erase isolation, racism and discrimination" (Paschali, 2008). One such example of a feminist science fiction is the book *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula LeGuin,

published in 1969. This book portrays a fictional race without genders. Once a month, they go into estrus, like an animal would, and assume genders. They're fine with both bearing and creating children, but they also see people with "permanent" genders as disgusting. In this society, there are no gender issues because the society comes with no genders. LeGuin wrote her novel this way because she wanted to look at the world without gender issues. As she noted in her introduction, while talking about how she doesn't think we should be androgynous like her fictional society: "I'm merely observing [through science fiction] that if you look at us [at certain times,] we already are" (LeGuin, 2010). She expanded on one possible view of the world in her fiction and explored one possibility of a world without genders. Feminist science fiction, therefore, can be used to create what feminists dream of: a world without gender discrimination. LeGuin didn't attempt to create either a dystopian or utopian world, since the world she portrays is as flawed as our own—no better and no worse. However, it does have to be noted that creating a utopia and taking it to its logical conclusion often creates dystopias instead. The planet of Eyeth isn't intended to be either utopian or dystopian; instead, it's intended to be merely another world that reveals the differences and similarities, as well as the flaws and virtues of various deaf people.

This deaf science fiction novel, *Eyeth*, makes what deaf people have been talking about for many years a reality: a place where they aren't discriminated against, a world they can truly call home. It takes place on a planet called Eyeth, which is home to a majority of deaf people from all nations, creeds and communication methods with hearing people being a minority.

This novel is also intended to take a huge step in Deaf literature by creating a work that is unlike any other, since it touches on a large group of deaf people. There are two works that have any similarity to *Eyeth* in their epic focus. The first, *Islay* (1986), by Douglas Bullard, is about a deaf man trying to establish a Deaf state while the second, *Mindfield* (2006), by John F. Egbert, is about a disease attacking half the people in America and leaving them deaf. Both deal with a larger amount of deaf people in one area than usual and create a space for those people. A third work, Raymond Luczak's story, "How to Become a Backstabber" (2001), is exclusively about a group of deaf people, but they are still in their own bubble set within the hearing world. *Eyeth*, on the other hand, is exclusively about deaf people, with both deaf protagonists and deaf antagonists.

Islay exclusively deals with hearing antagonists, as does *Mindfield*. The hearing antagonists in both novels all have some authority over people, especially deaf people. The oralist in *Islay* is emphasized for this specific reason, as is his downfall at the end. In *Mindfield*, the main hearing character, Nathan, after losing his hearing, is introduced to the Deaf culture and sign language and sees for himself that it is superior.

Raymond Luczak's story, "How to Become a Backstabber" has hearing characters as a source of internal conflict for the main character, who is deaf, and deaf characters as a source of external conflict. At the beginning, the nameless main character has hearing parents who are warm and loving, and they always support her in doing everything except learning how to sign: "But the unspoken corollary was that sign language would hinder you in insidious ways" (Luczak, 2002, p. 151). She rebels against them by learning how to sign and joining the deaf community. But it isn't long before she gets caught up in the

community's rumor mill. She repeats all of the gossip to her deaf husband, taking it at face value. Even though he's hurt by what she says, causing conflict between the two of them, she continues with it. Lacking deaf friends for the most part growing up, the main character craves the deaf community and, to be accepted, she lets them pull her down to their gossip-mongering level: "Somehow, without thinking, you pry loose some deep-down thoughts. [...] ...the friends are suddenly yours. Their appetite for what you think of others seems insatiable" (Luczak, 2002, p. 156). The main character feeds on their gossip and now the friends feed on her gossip, feeding her more gossip in return, continuing the cycle of crab theory by pulling her into their drama-filled world.

Crab theory originates from a statement Marcus Garvey makes in his autobiography while quoting Booker T. Washington. He writes,

> Booker Washington aptly described the race in one of his lectures by stating that we were like crabs in a barrel, that none would allow the other to climb over, but on any such attempt all would continue to pull back into the barrel the one crab that would make the effort to climb out. (Garvey, 1923)

Essentially, in crab theory, people of a certain group will "pull back" someone of their own race if he "escapes," or goes against the group's perspective. This crab theory was first applied to African-Americans in 1923 by Garvey. In 1949, Fred R. Murphy wrote a column about deaf people and how they acted towards their leaders, giving the first known example of crab theory within the deaf community. He wrote that after leaders of the deaf had made much effort to improve things for their community, "in many cases the deaf try to hinder their leaders" (Murphy, 1949) by criticizing them for their efforts. Therefore,

this theory is well-known within the deaf community. Both Luczak and Egbert apply crab theory in their stories.

In *Mindfield*, Nathan also struggles with crab theory: the deaf person pulling others (in this case, the hearing person) down to his level because they think that what they do is better. The crab theory is applied differently here than with Luczak, because in *Mindfield*, the deaf person is pulling down a hearing person and not another deaf person. This is notably different from Eyeth, where there are no hearing protagonists or antagonists.

Compared to any of these other works, *Eyeth* doesn't use crab theory as much, except in the case of Clerc, which is the Deaf culture represented as a country. There's an interesting parallel here between the deaf characters in *Mindfield* showing hearing people their ways and saying it's best and the Deaf country forcing other countries to follow their ways after gaining power over them.

How *Mindfield* handles the conquered differs from Clerc in *Eyeth*. *Mindfield*'s government sends deaf people to Hearing Habitats, which are similar to 1940s Japanese internment camps. This is nothing like any of the areas on Eyeth for deaf people. The closest parallel in Eyeth to Hearing Habitats is Gallaudet, the country for CODAs, or Children of Deaf Adults, which is far in the north and isolated to some degree from the rest of the continent. But even the people of Gallaudet have much more freedom in what they can do in their country than those in the Hearing Habitats, and their reasons for coming there are numerous, not singular.

Despite the difference in setting, the main characters of *Eyeth* and *Islay* share some characteristics, including acting foolish and having flaws that impact the plot. Cynthia Peters writes that Lyson Sulla from Islay "is perceived as a fool, [...] In taking on this persona, he becomes a kind of trickster" (Peters, 2000, p. 138). Shawn Wright, from *Eyeth*, also acts foolish as a young man. But they act foolish in different ways, with Lyson acting clownish due to his personality and Shawn acting immature due to his not knowing any better. Lyson continues to play with toy soldiers when he should be making serious plans and goes on a pointless cross-country journey. Meanwhile, seventeen-year-old Shawn has the job of running an entire planet but instead drowns himself in parties, because he's too young to understand the responsibilities of a job that was forced onto him. Lyson and Shawn also reach different outcomes in their stories. Both manage to do their places some good, but despite his terminal foolishness, Sulla succeeds more than Shawn does. He becomes governor of the new deaf state Islay. On the other hand, Shawn's negligence allows a war caused by one country that he is supposed to be monitoring. This war has a severe impact on his planet. Afterwards, a mature Shawn works to repair the politics and culture on Eyeth and then he hands it down, still slightly damaged, to his successor.

Islay has some influence on *Eyeth*, especially with their main characters. Both Sulla and Shawn fumble their way through their recently-obtained positions of leadership, while making mistakes and learning along the way. I read *Islay* a year or two before I started writing *Eyeth*, so I can see how I was influenced in my choosing to avert the stock deaf story tropes that *Islay* plays up. But otherwise, *Eyeth* doesn't have that much

influence from deaf literature in general, including *Mindfield*. I didn't read *Mindfield* until after I finished writing Eyeth.

While writing, I read a lot of deaf literature. I also remembered a documentary about deaf people I watched as a teenager, the PBS documentary *Through Deaf Eyes*. One item that they talked about in the documentary was the concept of Eyeth. Eyeth, they said, was a deaf story about a deaf world. That really caught my attention when I watched it, because I'd imagined a world for disabled people a few years earlier in one of my stories, but I'd never really thought about a world for only deaf people. Years later, I would end up using this idea of Eyeth in my own work.

Eyeth also had some influence from other works, again science fiction. An old story I wrote when I was much younger had some influence on *Eyeth*. Orson Scott Card also had some influence because of his emphasis on characters and his science fiction books *The Worthing Chronicle* and *Speaker for the Dead*.

Card is a science fiction writer, best known for his novel *Ender's Game*. His work is so-called "soft" science fiction because it has a strong emphasis on characters' feelings and thoughts over the exploration of and research in technology. Gary Westfahl writes that the definition of hard science fiction is "a form of science fiction that displays an especially heightened connection to science" (Westfahl, 2008). In contrast, soft science fiction uses technology, but doesn't go as into depth in how the technology works as hard science fiction does. I took this approach with *Eyeth*, focusing more on the characters' stories than the technologies of their days. Card proves his character-centric approach with two of his novels.

In *The Worthing Chronicle*, a man named Jason Worthing has inherited a psychic power called the Snipe. He uses this Snipe to his advantage, escaping his planet and going out into the galaxy. Eventually, Jason is responsible for bringing a colony to a new planet. Due to a problem with the ship, his people come to this new world knowing literally nothing. Jason teaches them the basics of life and everything they need to know. To them and their descendants, he's like their God.

I thought of Jason Worthing while setting up *Eyeth*. I liked the idea of a person being responsible for a world, like Jason's later descendants, who have the Snipe multiplied to the extent they can control every aspect of a person. These descendants are their world's Gods and are called the Watchers. They acted as gods to the people they watched over. When Jason returned after many years at the bottom of the sea, he criticized them for intervening too much in their people's lives. I liked the conflict between men as gods and their world's needs, so I decided to use it as the influence for my major conflict in *Eyeth*. I had Shawn as my "god" and Eyeth was his world that he let get out of control.

But even before thinking about *The Worthing Chronicle*, Card was still an influence on me when it came to creating my world and how I would set it up. His world-building skills are obviously seen in *The Worthing Chronicle* and *Speaker for the Dead*.

In the latter book, the itinerant titular Speaker for the Dead travels from planet to planet in the Hundred Worlds to speak people's deaths. I thought the setup for the Hundred Worlds' planets was fascinating and decided to apply the same concept to my book's universe. In the Hundred Worlds, people from one specific Earth culture live on

one of the colonized planets and populate that planet with their culture. For example, one world in another book, Pacifica, had Samoan people. The concept of one world, one culture, is actually a common concept in media: This trope, or common trend in literature and other types of media, is called Planet of Hats (Anonymous, 2013). A prime example for this trope is the television series Star Trek, which tends to depict alien species with a "hat," or one defining trait. When I decided to create a planet for deaf people, I was partly thinking of *Speaker of the Dead*.

Eyeth is not my first experiment with science fiction nor with deaf people, which years ago I grouped with disabled people generally. When I was about fourteen, I wrote a story about a planet called, "H. T. Rae." My main character, the original Zen Daniels, was a Guardian of the Gate and processed people who entered his planet to make sure they were disabled and not normal. Later in the story, Zen Daniels wanted to fight Earth in rebellion for what they had done to him, locking him and his people away.

The summer before my junior year of college, I reread "H. T. Rae." It was good from a fourteen-year-old's perspective but terrible from a twenty-year-old's perspective due to how much my writing skills had changed and matured. I decided to try rewriting the story, but it didn't work. Then I moved the action of the story to their new planet, Eyeth, and saw that was where my story was going to be set. I started setting up the planet, including which countries would be on it and what types of people would inhabit those countries. The novel itself is about a young man, Virgil G, who agrees to become the apprentice of Eyeth's current Guardian, Shawn Wright. They tie together the diversity of the planet Eyeth.

Eyeth is home to deaf people from all the countries on Earth who have established copies of their own countries or cultures. One continent, called Americana, is home to the various countries representing the whole spectrum of American deaf people and their culture. Gallaudet was initially considered the CODA country but is now home to hearing refugees who are not welcome in their native countries. Q is home to those who use Cued Speech, Milan is for those deaf people who grew up with oralism, Wheel supports those deaf people with additional disabilities and Clerc is for those who are Deaf, with a capital D representing their pride and culture. Other countries include Keller, England and Pegasus.

In a way, the country of Clerc can be considered the main antagonist of *Eyeth*. It's at the center of the conflict that's most central to *Eyeth*: its attempt to take over the world and trying to make everyone else under their control follow their culture and ways. They follow crab theory, trying to make everyone else like them because they believe their ways are superior.

Clerc was founded as a Deaf country, and their pride shows. Their national language is American Sign Language, or Ameslan as it is referred to in the novel, and they write in a system called Si5 that's designed for writing out sign language. They have an emphasis on the visual and visual arts: they use three-dimensional billboards for their advertisements, and have a thriving arts community that includes both artists and storytellers.

Milan, which is Clerc's polar opposite and adversary, has a reputation for excellence with technology. Since orally deaf people tend to rely on technology, people

from Milan continually improve their technology to make life better for themselves. This has led to their having a reputation on other planets for their expertise and skill with technology. This is all despite Eyeth's severe setback with technology at its founding, due to limited cargo space on their colony ships. Some advanced technology made it from Earth, such as 3-D billboards, but other technology did not. After the initial settlements, Milan seems to have remained the most motivated to continue developing technology.

Although in a highly technologically advanced future, at least on Earth, Eyeth starts out limited in its technology, similar to how deaf people on nineteenth-century Earth were similarly disadvantaged. Yet those deaf people found ways to cope, by finding each other and socializing to make up for the disadvantages given to them. Until the advent of captioned television and Internet, deaf people lagged behind hearing people in terms of modern trends. After they caught up via technology, they didn't have to gather to the extent they did before. Similarly, on Eyeth, deaf people all banded together in the beginning, despite their differences, for one mission. Not long after arriving on Eyeth, they remembered their differences, much to Zen Daniels' annoyance. Clerc was one of the worst offenders in stigmatizing differences and attempting to dominate.

Clerc is better known for its years of tyranny than for its arts community. For many years, people were bitter towards Clerc for forcing them to sign Ameslan and write in Si5 instead of signing their native languages and writing their form of English. This is a reversal of the process that happened on Earth, with hearing people forcing deaf people to learn how to speak and write English.

One country that chose to break off from Milan, Q, is comprised of deaf people who use Cued Speech, or cuers. Originally, when Eyeth was first settled, cuers were lumped in with Milan because some deaf people saw them as speaking and therefore labeled them as "oral," when in reality not all of them could speak. Later on, for their plan against Milan, a group of cuers met in a college, reflecting how many cuers tend to come from affluent parents with an educated background (Thomas, 2013). Their parents' affluence didn't carry on to the generations of cuers living on Eyeth as they diversified into different social classes in these new circumstances, but their education did. Since cueing was also originally designed to help deaf children with their reading skills, people from Q would also be much more educated than other countries in Americana, tending towards more academic pursuits.

Keller, another country in Americana, is designed for those who are deafblind. Wheel is a country also designed for those deaf people who have additional disabilities, like cerebral palsy or other mobility-related disabilities. Both countries provide additional support and accommodations for those who need it, unlike other countries on the continent of Americana. Wheel also has able-bodied residents who are willing to help as needed to help keep the country going.

American deaf people are the focus in *Eyeth*, since I'm American and know a lot more about those communities. I do touch on other countries, but I don't give an in-depth look at those countries because I wouldn't be able to justify how I have depicted them. I've had extensive personal experience with all of the American deaf communities I depict, but I have no experience with international deaf communities. I'd prefer to write

from experience and I also don't want to upset my international reader because I don't depict his community correctly.

But one of the main characters, Virgil, spent the last nine years of his life wandering extensively, so it was important that he spend time in non-American countries. I couldn't write him interacting in that type of environment well, so instead, when he narrated about some time he spent in another country, he was in a group that kept him isolated from what was really happening in that country. If a reader ever objected to that section, I could claim that wasn't what that country was really like.

At the beginning of their time on Eyeth, the top priority for many deaf people was continuing their heritage to keep their planet deaf, which would be a main concern for many years. For those from deaf families who could have deaf children, they knew that their communities would remain deaf. For the many deaf people who couldn't biologically pass down their deafness, they had their worries. If they had hearing children, which was almost a guarantee, then those children would drift away from the established deaf culture and norms and drift towards a hearing world, rendering deaf people the minority again.

Shortly before Eyeth was established, deaf geneticists were working on finding a way for their race to continue. As a young teenager, Shawn met with a few of those geneticists at a party who discussed their Option with him. The Option, they said, was a gene for deafness that could be injected into people as an almost asymptomatic virus. The "virus" would spread the gene through as much of their DNA as possible, modifying it with Deaf dominance and thus ensuring it would pass on to their future children.

Although such biotechnology is impossible in our world, it became a possibility in the future on Eyeth.

Of course, this Option met with controversy. People in Milan protested it, not wanting to interfere with nature or force deafness onto their children. This issue has a basis in history (on Earth) with mixed responses from deaf people about wanting deaf children. Anna Middleton writes of two contrasting case studies. In one case study, the deaf couple didn't want children because they didn't want to pass down their deafness. In the other case study, a culturally Deaf couple were thrilled to be able to pass down their deafness to their children (Middleton, 2006, p. 263). A lesbian couple gained some notoriety in 2002 trying to conceive a deaf baby by specifically choosing a genetically deaf sperm donor, but they would have loved their child either way: "As [one of the mothers] puts it: 'A hearing baby would be a blessing. A deaf baby would be a special blessing'" (Mundy, 2002). This comment indicates they still had a strong preference for a deaf baby. In general, deaf parents would still love their children whether or not they were deaf, but their background also influences their feelings towards the hearing status of their children.

The people of Clerc, being culturally Deaf, wanted to pass down their deafness to the next generation of people on Eyeth. Clerkers approved of the Option because they wanted to have deaf children as well. But people from Milan would have been fine with it either way, with some preferring hearing children. After Clerc took over Milan and forced its ways on them, including the Option, Milan would have objected to the Option because they didn't take as much pride in their deafness as Clerkers did and therefore

didn't want deaf children as much as they did. This is an example of Clerc acting as the colonizer of Milan, the colonized.

For the Option, there are a wide variety of genes that could be used, but it would be best to use a well-known and widespread gene, like connexin 26. Kathleen Arnos writes that "testing for connexin-26 mutations is relatively easy in comparison to other, more complex genes for deafness" (Arnos, p. 159, 2002) As a result, Connexin 26 is the most well-known genetic cause for deafness. It also fits two of the most common traits of genetic deafness: autosomal recessive and caused by one gene (Hilgert, Smith & Van Camp, 2009). Being recessive causes a problem: it takes two carriers of the gene to create more deaf children. In the general hearing population on Earth, this means that deafness is a rarity. In a group with high rates of recessive deafness, the chances of deaf children being born are much greater. Walter Nance and Michael J. Kearsey write of marriages between deaf individuals: "These marriages between individuals with the same type of recessive deafness are incapable of producing hearing offspring" (Nance and Kearsey, 2004). So the Option would involve gene therapy using Connexin 26 and then ensuring that absolutely everyone in a group has Connexin 26 to ensure that the deaf population of Eyeth will stay stable. It would only take a few people without Connexin 26 to throw this stability off if the group is still small, so many efforts had to be made early on in Eyeth's history. Since Clerc had the most invested in this scientific effort, they were able to bring the necessary equipment with them when they arrived.

Another point about the Option is that deaf people, like in Clayton Valli's poem "Dandelion," can be like dandelions. In the poem, a man tries to rid his lawn of

dandelions, but they continue to pop up: "the sun sneaked in/ warming a seed in the soil" (Valli, 2009, p. 180). You can pull them out, try to eradicate them, but more will continue to pop up. Paradoxically, deaf people pop up whether parents are deaf or hearing. If more deaf people get together to create deaf children, there's no guarantee they would succeed enough to increase the deaf population to the point where their population is sustainable. To reach the numbers of people needed for a sustainable and stable deaf population, deafness would have to be forced onto them. That's where the Option comes in, to force deafness onto Eyeth.

Most of the characters involved on Eyeth's stage are deaf in some way, so deafness doesn't play a role in Eyeth's colonialism at all. Instead, one group of deaf people is oppressing another. Colonialism is one of the key themes of *Eyeth*, and it involves the majority having power over the minority. On Earth, one aspect of colonialism would be where hearing people have power over deaf people. On Eyeth, colonialism is where people from Clerc have power over everyone else.

One of the most familiar examples of historical colonialism is when European countries took over many countries outside of Europe and colonized them. After the Europeans took over, they were the colonizers and oppressed the people who lived in the conquered countries. The colonizers oppressed the colonized people by keeping them down via government, social or psychological force. A. Memmi explains this: "I have often noted that the *deprivations* of the colonized are the almost direct result of the advantages secured to the colonizer" (Memmi, 1991, p. xii). In forcing down the colonized, or oppressing them, the colonizer gains more advantage.

The colonizer may gain more advantage, but the colonized person loses much more. They are put down by the colonizer and kept away from power so much that they lose motivation to rule themselves. Memmi says of this,

> 'They are not capable of governing themselves,' says the colonizer. 'That is why,' he explains, 'I don't let them and will never let them enter the government.' The fact is that the colonized does not govern. Being kept away from power, he ends up by losing both interest and feeling for control (Memmi, 1991, p. 95).

This results in the colonized person feeling powerless and completely submitting himself to the colonizer.

But if the colonized person instead chooses to resist the colonizer, he is participating in post-colonialism. Post-colonialism is the process of overcoming colonialism, but it doesn't always have to apply to history. As the critic Stephen Slemon wrote, "the concept [of post-colonialism] proves most useful [...] when it locates a specifically anti- or post-colonial discursive in culture" (Slemon, 1991, p. 3). The culture here is any culture or race affected by colonialism. Colonialism begins when the colonial power is used against the colonized, but post-colonialism begins when the colonized starts resisting the colonists. This resistance comes in different forms.

One such form is completely rejecting colonialism. Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams write that anti-colonial texts "reject the premises of colonialist intervention [... and] might be regarded as post-colonial insofar as they have 'got beyond' colonialism and its ideologies" (Childs & Williams, p. 4). In rejecting colonialism, a text can also rise up beyond colonialism by rising beyond it to something that isn't some attempt to restore

the state before colonization and instead moves past the colonized state to an independent state.

Another form of post-colonization action is equalization. Childs and Williams write, "Ella Shohat asks, 'When does the post-colonial begin?' [...] and the historian Arif Dirlik [answers, half-seriously,] 'When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe'" (Childs & Williams, 1997, p. 7). Dirlik is deliberately misreading Shohat's question here, but his answer does have some basis in fact. Another way to overcome colonialism is to become equal to the colonizers in stature. If a professor from the Third World, a colonized person, can become equal to a professor from the First World, a colonizer, then post-colonialism has truly arrived. Since Third World people still have many years to reach the level where they are equal with the First World, then post-colonialism would really start with the process of becoming equal not just the end result or achievement of equality.

Two countries, Clerc and Milan, are failures at overcoming their colonialist pasts. Milan still follows the rules of colonialism. Clerc tries to implement post-colonialism rules and fails. At least two other countries, Q and Wheel, succeed at overcoming colonialism and creating their own niche on Eyeth.

On Earth, the hearing majority oppressed deaf people by telling them that the majority's rules were the only ones to follow. On Eyeth, Clerc oppresses other deaf people by telling them that Clerc's rules are the only ones to follow. In this way, Clerc fails to overcome its shackles of colonialism and instead becomes the colonizer, repeating the cycle of colonialism.

As in other works of deaf literature that focus on a place of some sort for deaf people, Clerc follows a "tit for tat" strategy: it does to others what others wrongfully did to them. They exercise their united might by taking over other countries. Their point is that they are one of the best on Eyeth, so they should prove that their ways are the best ways for all deaf people to follow. They do this by forcing their ways onto others to make their ways widely accepted and therefore be the best, just like hearing people once forced their ways onto them so long ago. Paulo Freire wrote that because the dehumanization process coming from oppression "is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so" (Freire, 1970, p. 28). Clerc is still struggling against those who made them so, and they don't know how to break the "iron collar" of colonialism. Albert Memmi wrote that "the colonial condition cannot be adjusted to; like an iron collar, it can only be broken" (Memmi, 1991, p. 128).

Milan is also a failure at breaking the iron collar and being truly free, but they are more obvious than Clerc about it. They still act in ways akin to the colonized, acting as they did back on Old Earth and following the ways that hearing people set for them centuries earlier instead of finding a better way to live, one that involves less struggle with daily life. Some people would prefer having lives where they can communicate without struggling, but people from Milan would argue that they need to struggle to live, like a caterpillar that needs to break out of its pupa and not be cut out of it. Lanners, as they're more commonly known in the novel, still speak and use some kind of aid to help them hear and "function" in everyday life. On Eyeth, they are now free of hearing people

in a society that supports them and helps them function. But since they never fought to break free and never tried to find ways to live other than what hearing people gave them, they're still under the oppression of colonialism.

Q, which broke off from Milan, succeeded in overcoming colonialism with anti-colonialism. They have their roots in colonialism: a hearing person invented their mode of communication, Cued Speech. On Old Earth, some cuers followed hearing people's ways and learned to speak, while some didn't and only used voiceless cueing. This dynamic continued onto the disabled planet Ray and from there onto Eyeth. When Eyeth was initially being settled, Lanners usurped because they were perceived as being "speaking." Those speakers were all lumped into one country. However, some people in Milan didn't like how those cuers used their hands to communicate. This resentment grew after Clerc invaded Milan and Milan developed a hatred of all who used their hands to communicate. Being persecuted and oppressed in their own country, the cuers banded together and broke off from Milan and their colonizers, founding their own country, Q. In this way, they also broke free of the influence of colonialism by totally resisting it. Virgil recalls their showing kindness to him, which was very unusual to him since he was always mistreated for who he was, so people from Q are also accepting of all.

Another country's struggle to break free from colonialism is also directly depicted in Eyeth. Wheel is a country established as a support system for those deaf people who have additional disabilities, especially mobility disabilities. Clerc doesn't provide as much support for those people, but while Clerc tries to rule the world, it runs Wheel under suzerainty, meaning that any external affairs are managed by Clerc's government while all

internal affairs are run by Wheel's government. Under its Empire rules, Clerc also designates education rules for Wheel, which includes strict adherence to fluency in Ameslan. Some Wheel citizens struggle with those rules, especially if they have a mobility disability that prevents them from achieving full fluency in Ameslan. So a movement starts in Wheel, inspired by others in Keller and England, for full independence of the country and full equalization. This movement meets up with the other two movements and grows into a larger movement to topple Clerc and give all countries under Clerc rule their full independence. In this way, Wheel, along with other countries, wish to break free from colonialism as well, by becoming independent and equal to other countries.

The people who play an important role in the shaping of Q and Milan in this colonialist struggle are father and daughter, and both struggle in their respective adolescent stages to find their place in the world. Peter Washington, the father, was born in Clerc but later moves to Milan with his mother, who is a cuer. His struggles with adapting to Milan's ways, including wearing hearing aids and learning English, mirroring our world's deaf children who struggle to adapt by wearing hearing aids and learning English in school. But Peter finds a friend in Carson, who's from a cueing family. In high school, Peter helps Carson and his father with the movement for Q. As a Clerc native, he is in a unique position: he has the choice to reject Milan ways and choose his own, but he is also the son of a cuer. He could have rejected Milan ways entirely, but he also had a cueing background, so he felt affinity with those who cued. In fact, it is only after meeting his cueing friend that he is able to adapt to Milan ways. He may be able to adapt to them, but he doesn't fully accept them, only holding onto those skills in order to survive.

Many years after leaving Clerc, Peter moves back with his wife and daughter but to his daughter, Claire, it is a disaster. She suffers through the same initial non-belonging struggle her father went through as a boy. Except the countries are reversed and she is of high school age, so her problems were more social than purely educational. In Milan, Claire is popular with many friends. On her first day in Clerc, a group of boys beat up Claire for wearing hearing aids, and in her last year of high school, she is arrested on suspicion of being a spy for Milan and has to drop out. She signs and cues at home, but she sees moving her hands as being shameful, so she doesn't embrace her Clerc side as well as her father embraced his Milan side. After she completes college, Claire is motivated by some old friends' Milan troubles to return to her home country and help them there by becoming governor. She passes laws that force Milan to stay the way it was, championing oralism and making large strides in technology, going past cochlear implants to "phonodes."

Peter and Claire, while total opposites in their adaptations to a new country, have many parallels. Both have friends to help them with the transition process, but unlike Claire, Peter bonds more with his Milan friends and actively helps them. Peter also helps his friends create their own country and become independent of Milan, while Claire, upon returning to her home country, helps make it more isolated and independent of Clerc. Their personal conflicts are typical of deaf literature, since they involve problems with communication, but those conflicts also go more into depth about how far these problems can go.

The communication problems in *Eyeth* show the classic dichotomy of signing versus speaking, but they never mention hearing abilities. It's generally accepted on the world of Eyeth that most people around you are deaf, so the ability to hear isn't remarked upon. Virgil is stunned when Shawn tells him that, back on Earth, people like them were persecuted for being deaf and given less opportunity than everyone else. This is a huge shock to Virgil because he was born hearing and therefore started out inferior on Eyeth, so he grew up thinking that deaf people have all the privilege.

This reversal is intended to be a shock to the reader. This revelation also makes Virgil grateful for where he was born because if he had been born on Earth and lost his hearing there, he would have lost privilege. The story helps understand the colonialist struggles by contrast with the situation on Earth.

Another contrastive technique that involves Earth is the story of Jason Wright. Out of all the narratives and stories embedded in *Eyeth*, the story of Jason Wright is the obvious outlier. It's the only part of the novel that takes place on Earth, and most of the characters in the story are hearing. Unlike the rest of *Eyeth*, Wright's story follows conventional rules of colonialism instead of inverting them. For the reader, this is a key to balancing out the rest of the novel and understanding both sides of the story. It is integral to understanding the other side's story and seeing their own play out as well. However, one similarity also stands out.

Wright, a firefighter, rescues Shawn from a burning church when Shawn is a young boy, and then Wright agrees to foster him. Already colonialism is starting to show: the authority figure rescuing the weaker, more vulnerable disabled figure and caring for him.

In this section, the hearing characters triumphed over the deaf characters. This is evidenced by the law forcing Wright's co-worker Adam's deaf grandson, Robbie, to be taken away on account of his disability. This law is in place to report all disabled people so that they can be moved off Earth, showing the majority's power over the minority. Wright's ex-girlfriend gleefully reports his breaking of this law with his not reporting Shawn immediately.

But not all hearing characters in this section are cruel. Adam loves Robbie and so does his son, Monty. Monty goes so far as to find an old book full of "gestures," or signs, that he can use to communicate with his son Robbie. Wright later gets this book from Adam so he can try to communicate better with Shawn, who's only five years old and can barely write his name.

Cruelty is still an important sub-theme that unites Earth and Eyeth. Shawn suffered at the hands of hearing people before he met Wright. His stepfather didn't like him or his two sisters, who were also both deaf, and favored Shawn's older hearing brother. So Shawn and his sisters would be locked up in the house all day while his older brother went outside and interacted on a normal basis. Then Shawn's stepfather gave him and his sisters away to a church near Baltimore, not wanting to deal with them anymore. The three of them were locked up in a church nursery with very little food, and Shawn recalled his sisters giving him their food so that he could live.

Such is the legacy of "man's inhumanity to man" that this abuse of people for their perceived differences happens on both sides in Eyeth. Virgil is bitter when he realizes that this type of thing happens everywhere, even in Clerc, the country he once thought would

be a deaf paradise. Colonialism and reverse colonialism both involve the lesser person getting hurt, no matter who's on top. The colonialism in Jason Wright's chapter reminds the readers of this: after all the atrocities committed in *Eyeth*, the reader has to be reminded that back on Earth, where they live, this kind of thing happens in their world too. Disabled children are more likely to be abused, and deaf children have a harder time communicating about abuse as well: "Communication problems inherent in many disabilities render children unable to understand and/or verbalize episodes of abuse" (Sullivan and Knutson, 1998). Since they can't communicate that someone is abusing them, then it would be easier for someone to take advantage of them and abuse them. This is one of the negative side-effects of colonialism in the deaf world here on Earth.

The dramatization of colonialist and post colonialist dynamics is my attempt to combat how many characters in deaf literature are tokens or objects of pity. *Islay* comes the closest to rebelling against the current model of colonialism: the deaf people rising up to defeat the hearing characters. But this is marred by *Islay*'s humorous approach, which takes down the seriousness of this action. The hearing characters are present only for the conflict aspect.

Eyeth is a big step for deaf literature because it does two things no other work of deaf literature has done: creates a world comprised of people who are deaf for the most part and avoids using hearing people as the sole or main source of conflict. Many conflicts in other works rely on tension between the majority hearing characters and the minority deaf characters, but *Eyeth*'s protagonists and antagonists are all deaf while hearing people remain only in history or as historical context and only as minor characters. The few

minor hearing characters that are in Eyeth make important contributions to the story, but they're not key to the conflict like so many other hearing characters are in much of deaf literature.

I hope that, in the future, young deaf writers will also visit the world of Eyeth through their writing and add more stories. On Eyeth, their characters don't have to struggle with hearing characters for conflict. These writers can break out of the colonialism mold and create independent stories, including both truly culturally Deaf and all-inclusive deaf stories.

It would not be realistic to say that all of these stories will completely avoid conflict with hearing people. Some of my own potential Eyeth story ideas for later works do involve conflict with hearing people to a small degree. But those young deaf writers' stories that use Eyeth should focus more on what it's like to be deaf among your peers, not what it is like to be deaf out in a hearing world. If these stories focus on everyday situations with a look into what being among deaf people is like, then I've achieved the ultimate goal of this novel. I have created a novel of "culture talking."

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Appendices to Introduction

A. List of Characters

Adam: Jason's coworker who has a deaf grandson. 50s? Earth native. Firefighter.

Alyssa: coworker who goes with "Nathan" (Virgil's fake identity) to a party. 20s. Clerc native. Federal employee.

Andrew Miller: cover name for Milan army mole and real Clerker soldier. 20s. Clerc native. Soldier.

Bea G: Virgil's younger sister. Three years younger than he is. Gallaudet native.

Ben: Mattie's husband, much beloved in his town. 30s when he died. Clerc native.

Carson: one of Peter's friends and son of founder of Q. Teens. Milan native.

Cassie Wall: girl who relates first story to Guardian. Teens to early 20s. England native. Student.

Claire Washington Zanes: eventual governor of Milan, daughter of Peter. Teens to later adulthood when she told her story to the Guardian. Milan native. Law student and governor.

Clerc president (Shawn's time): the man who willingly goes along with the Guardian's decisions. 50s. Ray native. President.

Clerc president (Virgil's time): figurehead who is the next to hire "Nathan". 40s? Clerc native. President (supposedly)

Dax Tetley: one of Claire's good friends who informs her of the Clerc menace in Milan. Teens to 20s. Milan native.

Dillon, Russet, Magenta and Kylee: the Guardian's group of close friends the year he was 19. Teens. Various countries.

Jake Miller: Half-brother of Andrew and mole for Milan army. 20s. Milan native. Fake soldier.

James Butcher: PFC who would change the world with his helping win Clerc's first battle against Milan and many others. Childhood to late adulthood when he tells his story to the Guardian out of guilt. False Silent. Clerc native. Career soldier.

Jason Andrew Wright: Shawn's foster father who cared for him. Late 20s to 60s-70s? Earth native. Firefighter.

Jody Mailer: former best friend of Cassie. Teens to early 20s. Clerc native, immigrated to England as a child. Art student.

Joshua Wright: Shawn's bastard son who tracks him down years later. 19. Clerc native. Alerts his father to the reality of the world around him.

Keith: hires "Nathan McLean." 70s? Clerc native. Senator.

Landon Hall: Shawn's stepfather. Earth native. Businessman and politician.

Marta Henry: Jason's ex-girlfriend and current "friend." 20s. Earth native. Social worker.

Mattie: widow of Ben, hated in her small Clerc town. Early 30s? England native.

Megan: Jason's adopted granddaughter. 20s-30s? Earth native. Librarian.

Michael: Activist in Keller revolution against Clerc. 20s to 30s? Keller native. Activist.

Mr. and Mrs. Powers: parents to grown sons Russell and Tyrone who went away to war. 40s? Clerc natives.

Pepper: Mother of Shawn's (only?) child Joshua. 20s or so? Could be from any signing country.

Peter Washington: helped with founding of Q. Ten years old to grown man in his 40s. Clerc native.

Pyotr: fellow Organization Comrade who helps Virgil get to the hospital after Virgil's hand got broken and later searches for him. About 16, later about 24. Poccener native. Organization member.

Royal: Virgil's friend. Early 20s. Pegasus native. Inventor.

Russell Power: son who went on leave after his brother died, grieving for him and going into a depression. 20s. Clerc native. Soldier who eventually died a dishonorable death of suicide.

Scotty: bartender at the Broken Finger who helps Mattie. 40s? Clerc native. Bartender.

Sergeant Marshall: James' superior who receives the intel about the Lanner soldiers' information on the mole. 30s? Clerc native. Career soldier.

Shawn Wright: one of the main characters, the other protagonist, could be argued to be the antagonist. Chronologically 300+ years old, biologically 47. Old Earth native. Guardian.

The Organization: mafia-like organization that serves to "protect" people in Poccener but really only serves its own self-interests.

Trisha: Leader of the Wheel revolution against Clerc. Teens to 30s? Clerc native dumped in Wheel. Activist.

Tyrone Power: son who was killed in line of duty. 20s? Clerc native. Soldier.

Virgil G: one of the main characters, definitely the protagonist. 21-22 years old, Gallaudet native. Apprentice to the Guardian.

Zen Daniels: mentor to Shawn. Appeared as a young man in flashbacks. Ray native. Guardian of the Gate, First Founder of Eyeth.

B. List of Eyeth Continents and Countries in Americana

Americana Countries

Clerc: Known for its arts and architecture scenes. It was initially settled by culturally Deaf Americans. Clerc education is required from age five to age sixteen, with eleven grades plus an optional grade twelve for college-bound students. Sign: Laurent Clerc's namesign. Demonym: Clerker

Milan: Known for its advances in technology on a solar system-wide level at least. It was initially settled by oral deaf and hard-of-hearing Americans. Milan education is required from age three to age eighteen, with required preschool, kindergarten and thirteen grades. They have an alliance with Gallaudet, formed while Milan was part of the Empire. Demonym: Milanner (archaic)/ Lanner (current)

Pegasus: Known for its musical and percussions scene. Also has an underground market, the largest in Americana. It was initially settled by deaf Americans who used Pidgin Signed English and didn't feel comfortable in either Clerc or England. They have an alliance with England, acting as a protector to the more vulnerable country. Demonym: Gasser

Q: Known for its scholars and academia. It's a mark of high honor to get a doctorate from a Quick university. Settled by cuers. Similar educational system to Milan, but it makes preschool optional. Sign: Cue for "Q," and for "Quick," a snapping of the fingers. Demonym: Quick

England: Known for its beaches and tourist destinations. It was initially settled by deaf Americans who signed English and didn't feel comfortable in either Clerc or Pegasus due

to the presence of Deaf culture. Sign: The sign for ENGLAND with the hands reversed. Demonym: Englander

Keller: Known for their deafblind community, advances in technology to help deafblind people and counseling centers. It was initially settled by deafblind Americans and people who had Usher's syndrome. Demonym: Lerite

Wheel: It was initially settled as a "non-country" by American deaf people with multiple disabilities, intended to be a center for therapy and other accessibility issues, since it was on the flattest piece of land in Americana, but it grew into a country in its own right. They have a close alliance with Keller. Demonym: Wheeler

Continents

Americana: The equivalent of North America/the United States on Eyeth. Some North American countries' deaf people (especially Canadians) were merged in with the Americans on Ray. At some point after the Empire crumbled, the large Canadian and Mexican cities already in existence banded together into countries in their own right.

Amécen: The Eyeth equivalent of Central America. Costa Rican deaf people carry some of the most power, but others, like the Nicaraguan country, are catching up.

Hartelo: The equivalent of South America on Eyeth. So named because its people couldn't agree on whether or not the continent looked more like an axe or a hammer.

Europa: Located on most of the "ring" of the landmass Ringstone, it's the Eyeth equivalent of Europe. Epee, the French deaf country, has an alliance with Clerc. Other known countries include Deutschland, Siena, Britain and Poccener.

Thudimi: Located on the "stone" and some of the "ring" of the continent Ringstone, it's the Eyeth equivalent of Asia.

Bara: Located on the landmass Boaz, taking up three-quarters, it's the Eyeth equivalent of Africa.

Oz: Taking up a quarter of the continent Boaz, it's the Eyeth equivalent of Australia and New Zealand, and also includes Pacific deaf communities. Oz has an alliance with Britain.

Eyeth: The Novel

Chapter I: The Meeting

There was a faraway planet called Eyeth. On this planet, on a continent called Americana, in a country called Pegasus, a ship landed in the coastal city Posei.

After the gangway was lowered, a curly-haired young man wearing sunglasses bolted down, running out into the city itself.

In the bus depot, he got a ticket to a town called Mace and boarded the next bus. He felt like someone was watching him. So he got off the bus right outside of the next town over and walked through the countryside.

He soon got tired and set up camp so he could have a good rest after all his time at sea. As the stars glittered in the dark green sky overhead, he fell asleep.

His dark blue eyes opened to see a plain white ceiling. When he realized he wasn't seeing a brilliant yellowish-green morning sky, he sat up. Something was wrong. Strange, itchy clothes rubbed against his skin, further awakening him to what had happened. It had been almost eight years since the last time he was in this kind of situation, but he wasn't thirteen anymore.

He took in his surroundings: thin mattress, metal bed, his camping backpack under the bed, metal bowl on the floor, and an open arch in front of him. Through the arch was an alcove that held one low ceramic bowl on the floor and another ceramic bowl on a column, with a water tap above coming out of the cracked concrete wall. This was one weird cell, if it had a separated bedroom and a bathroom.

There didn't seem to be a way out of the room: all of the walls in the bathroom and bedroom showed no signs of a door. The young man sat, cross-legged on the bed and closed his eyes, going into a meditation state. There was fogginess in his mind, but that was more because of drugs, probably, and less because of exhaustion, or so he assumed. If someone had stolen him away in the night, he didn't remember.

By habit, he went over his personal details. Name? Virgil G. What was his latest ID? Oz driver's license using the Geary ID. It described him as having brown eyes, which wasn't true. His eyes changed color too much to matter, anyway.

Something made the floor vibrate. Virgil opened his eyes and noticed that one section of the wall had withdrawn into another section. A blank-faced android in a servant's blue and gold uniform entered, holding a tray of food. The android placed the tray on a fold-out table, bowed stiffly, then left.

As soon as the wall was closed, Virgil took the tray and balanced it on his knees. Then he examined the food, making sure it wouldn't drug or poison him. It seemed normal enough: beef stew, bread, a glass of milk. His sensitive nose detected nothing, so Virgil dug into his food.

As Virgil was finishing, the wall opened up once again. A tall and lanky old man walked through the opening, wearing blue robes. He appeared to be in his late fifties with a stooped posture, thinning once-blond hair and a grayish-blond beard. Green-brown eyes studied the young man sitting on the bed balancing a tray on his legs.

Virgil kept one hand on his tray to make sure the leftover food wouldn't spill, but his other hand moved in speech. "Where am I?"

"Zonia." The old man used an archaic sign for it, but Virgil, remembering the Si5 word for it from the books he'd inhaled during his extensive stays in libraries as a teenager, was puzzled. That sign was age three hundred. How old was this man?

Virgil's eyes narrowed. "I thought that place was gone?" Gone carried the connotation of an old castle reduced to dust.

"Not gone. Hidden." The old man smiled and stepped forward. "My student, I had you brought here for a reason."

Virgil saw an opening. The tray tumbled to the floor, spilling what little was left, as he stood up and ran for the door. But he was stopped by the old man's arm flinging out, barring the entryway and knocking him to the floor.

The old man regarded the dark-haired young man's tendons standing out on his neck, his round ashen face and his shaking arms. He held the dark-haired young man's blinking dark blue eyes in his glance. He waited until the tendons relaxed. He waited until the blood flowed back into the young man's face. He waited until the arms stopped shaking. Then the old man signed, "I have a question for you."

Virgil stood up. His hands, missing the familiar pockets, slid all the way down the rough canvas pants he was wearing. "Where are my clothes?"

"It's rude to put your hands into your pockets," the old man signed. "You will change into other ones soon."

Virgil scowled and crossed his arms, keeping one arm to himself as he signed. "What's happening?!"

"Go change." The old man took a stack of clothes from an android servant standing nearby and held them out to Virgil.

Virgil took the stack with two fingers on each hand, while giving the old man a skeptical look.

The old man smiled. "Meet me in the throne room," he signed, then bowed deeply and left, leaving Virgil bewildered.

He remembered reading that this hidden island of Zonia, along with its palace, was originally built for Zen Daniels over three hundred years ago, then it was given to the Guardian as his home base for his years traveling. But in library books, it said that Zonia was flattened to the ground a hundred years ago, long gone by now.

Virgil unfolded the stack of clothes. They were like what the old man was wearing: a yellowish-tan tunic with a square collar, dark blue pants, a blue cassock to wear over those, and a pair of dark shoes.

After changing into the strange new clothes, Virgil emerged from his cell into a cavernous hallway. He stopped and looked around in complete awe.

The hall was paneled with a reddish wood. One side was lined with great cathedral-like arches and the other opened to a square courtyard. The arches pointed up to a great vaulted ceiling—divided into square sections. The floor had a checkerboard pattern of dark and light wood. On the other side of the hallway, there were several doors.

Virgil walked to the door at the end. An icon of a three-pointed crown was engraved above the door. He tried to push the door open, but it wouldn't respond. He

looked for a touchpad to push with his hand, but there was no such pad. Frustrated, he kicked at the door.

It bounced open a little bit.

There was a handle on the door, he saw now, feeling like an idiot. This place was much older than he'd thought. Of course it would have inconvenient door knobs that took up time. What if you were talking to someone? You would have to stop talking just to open the door.

Seeing that hallway, he would have guessed this place was maybe age fifty, not age four hundred or however long ago it was that they shifted to push doors. He pulled outward on the handle and the door opened into the throne room.

In an enormous room with light blue walls and a dark brown wooden floor, the old man was sitting on a throne on a dais. He saw Virgil standing there, scowling in his new clothes, and he smiled. "Did you enjoy the door?"

"How old is this place?"

"Patience."

"What on Eyeth is this place?" Virgil repeated, marching into the room. He went up to the dais. His hands were visibly shaking and his signing was hard to read. "It's not like anywhere else I've ever seen in this world, and I've been all over! What is it?"

The old man rose from the throne. He descended to the bottom of the dais and stood in front of Virgil. "This is my home," he signed. "I am the Guardian of Eyeth. From here, I watch over this world and decide what happens."

Virgil gaped at the old man standing before him. This was the face behind that ugly cylindrical Guardian helmet. Almost nobody on Eyeth saw the Guardian without his helmet and blank smiling mask.

"How do I know it's you?"

"Last time I was here on Eyeth, I attended a parade in Fletcher, sponsored by their Little London community. I'm told your parents were there.

All details Virgil had never told anyone else. He would never admit that he was from Gallaudet. "So you pulled my details from some records. This palace… it's all yours?"

"Once every ten years," the old man behind the Guardian's helmet signed. "Come."

Virgil followed the old man to a table in the corner of the room. The old man picked up a tan manila envelope lying there, undid the string, and pulled out a bundle of pages. With his other hand, he signed the words, "Dear those involved with the government of Clerc, fuck you." He looked up at Virgil and smiled before continuing. He read out some of the grievances against Clerc listed in the letter before Virgil grabbed the papers he was holding and tried to pull them away.

"Stop," he signed when the old man looked up. "How did you get that?"

"Some time ago, they gave this to me. They knew you wrote it, but they couldn't catch you. They wanted me to arrest you."

"Arrest me? Why?" Virgil's heart pounded in his chest.

"They wanted to arrest you for…" The old man started ticking them off on his fingers. "…wrongfully entering the country; usage of false identification; illegal gainful employment, spreading of falsehoods; and treason. Treason was at the top."

"Treason for what?" Virgil knew why it was but still felt he had to hide it. He had to seem good for this man, the one who held the world in his hands once every ten years.

The old man put the paper down. "The higher-ups, they couldn't believe someone would speak out against them. A true Clerker couldn't have written this letter."

"Why do they think I wrote it?"

"It was someone who sneaked in. Someone who was intelligent enough to know how to get in and act. Someone who understands the problems of the world wrote this letter."

Virgil looked at the bundle of papers. He couldn't sign anything, but the old man's hands moving again caught his attention.

"How old were you?" the old man asked, emphasizing the sign for you.

"I was age seventeen." Virgil glanced at the papers again. "I can't believe they read it. I thought they would toss it."

"A teenager's words aren't worthless." The old man looked steadily at Virgil. "You entered Clerc and saw problems there, didn't you?"

Signs poured off of Virgil's hands. "They were too snobbish in their thinking. They were too closed-minded. They didn't see the pile of their problems. But I did. I wanted to fix that country."

"Why fix it? Many people think that country should collapse because of what it did a long time ago. And Zen Daniels didn't like some of the first Clerkers."

Zen Daniels? The Guardian referred to Zen Daniels as if he had known him personally. But that was impossible. Virgil thought the Guardian traveled and then, for nine years, did nothing.

"Did you learn that from the history books?" Virgil asked. As a young teenager, he had tried to find information on Zen Daniels, a futile search. He was surprised anybody knew anything about him.

"No. He told me."

Virgil's eyes narrowed. "Impossible. Impossible!"

"Tell me why you want to fix Clerc."

"First tell me how you know someone who died before you were born."

The old man gave him that steady gaze again. "I brought you here, why?" He indicated the letter. "I read this letter and found what? A young man so angry at a country that he wrote out about twenty pages' worth of grievances, complaints and constructive ways to fix the problems he saw, despite his salutation. That's not normal for a seventeen-year-old boy."

Virgil winced. "How did they figure it was me?"

"Descriptions help. Plus you were involved with the higher-ups. You listed problems only those in government knew about. That narrowed down the list."

Virgil stepped away from the old man and circled around the throne room once, taking in what he saw. He didn't want to deal with his past being thrown back at him four years later. The past had to be avoided at all costs. He had to flee, soon.

Halfway through his tour around the room, Virgil felt something. He turned to see the old man following him. Virgil signed, "What's this room for?"

"I was crowned Guardian here, long ago. On Old Earth, they crowned kings who controlled the world. But I'm not a king."

"You sure you're not a king?"

"You will learn what I mean if you stay."

Virgil turned, frustrated, and continued circling around the room. When he returned to the table, he picked up the letter and reread it. They hadn't taken any of his suggestions.

The old man touched him on his shoulder. "What if I told you that you could bring those changes you want to see? For Clerc? For the whole world?"

Virgil looked down at his letter. "How?"

"Become my student. I told you that I'm the Guardian. But I have become old and exhausted. I need someone fresh to take over my job, someone who wants a better world as much as I do."

Virgil's face twisted. He walked away. The vibrations of the old man's feet followed him through the floor, but he didn't stop. He went back to the great arched hallway.

At the other end of the hallway, he turned right and went down the steps to the courtyard. Arched open hallways on two sides of the courtyard stood opposing each other. The courtyard itself was open to the pale green sky. A winding brick path ran through the blue grass.

Virgil fell into one of the white lounge chairs scattered around the courtyard and held his head in his hands. This crazy old man was asking him to have control of the whole world, to be able to fix it. For years, Virgil had dreamed about changing the world, making it a better place. All this power was overwhelming. Why should a young man in his twenties be given control of the world? Virgil thought they picked someone much older to be the Guardian. Somebody who was thirty could get four years' worth of work before retiring. Maybe they thought they could get five years out of him.

It was too much power. Too much. All of those damn details were right. A little over a year before Virgil was kicked out of Gallaudet for having broken ears, his parents' community, Little London, had thrown a huge parade in honor of the then-visiting Guardian. These hearing people had fawned on this masked deaf man and worshipped the ground he walked on because he could make things better or worse for them. On any other day, they spat on deaf people, who reminded them too much of their differences.

Virgil didn't want to be worshipped. He wanted to bring about change, but he didn't want to be loud and obvious about it. That was what he wanted, not power. Power could warp him so much he wouldn't like who he was. He had seen what power could do to people.

But this man, the Guardian if that was really who he was, didn't seem warped. He was very patient and not desperate for power. He also seemed uncomfortable in this palace. On his tour around the throne room, Virgil had seen the old man rub his chin with two fingers a lot.

He looked up at the comforting sky. He'd seen pictures of skies from other planets, including Old Earth. Old Earth's sky was an unsettling shade of deep blue, but Eyeth's was perfect. This sky overarched a crazy world full of people who mostly couldn't hear. Sometimes, Virgil thought back to when he was little, to the sounds he could hear back then. The greybird had a beautiful song when it was out flying by itself. But whenever little Gil observed greybirds in flocks, they were always fighting, snapping at each other and squawking. Just like this world… people could be wonderful on the individual level yet be dreadful on the group level.

Well, wasn't that the Guardian's job? To stop those people from being awful and make this world better? This man said he was exhausted. Maybe he'd gotten too tired to do his job right.

A year or so ago, Royal told Virgil that he thought Virgil could change the world. Virgil had scoffed at that then, but now he wondered if his friend was correct.

The old man appeared in Virgil's view, standing over him.

Virgil sat up and squinted up at the old man, rubbing his forehead. Without his sunglasses, a migraine aura had appeared. "What's happening?"

"I apologize if I frightened you. I realize it's a lot for you."

"Why me? You could get someone who's older. They'd do better."

"Youth have more ideals, dreams. They're better dreamers than old people." The old man looked up at the sky. "Sometimes I miss Old Earth. I remember J---" here, he used an archaic namesign, with no flairs at all- "showing me how to find animals in the clouds."

Virgil looked up at the sky, squinting against the sunlight. "I think I see a rabbit up there." He pointed at the vague white cloud formation.

"I thought that was a bear." The old man smiled. "This world, do you want to change it?"

Virgil had one question first. "How old were you when you got this job?"

"Younger than you."

Virgil faced the old man. "For now, I'll be your student." Why not? He had nothing to lose.

The old man bowed. "And I will be your teacher."

Then Virgil followed his teacher to another knobbed door, which led to a smaller hallway. The old man went into one of the doors here. It led to a videophone room with an ancient touchscreen model. Virgil had sight-heard of those. A room! Just for signing on the phone! It was a ridiculous luxury. Virgil signed so, and the old man shook his head.

"It's for privacy," he signed before going up to the touchscreen and tapping the numbers he wanted to call.

Virgil thought it was still absurd. If you saw someone signing away, wearing glowing videophone glasses and motion cables fastened to their elbows in public, you didn't openly stare at them. You could glance at them, try to catch useful information to pass down later, yes, but it was bad manners to eavesdrop. With manners, why need a private room at all?

The old man sat on the couch. Virgil sat down next to him as the videophone flashed, waiting for the other end to pick up.

Soon enough, someone that Virgil recognized from the Clerc government appeared on the screen. Virgil would have ducked, rolled out and fled if the old man hadn't stopped him.

The old man signed in formal Ameslan. "Greetings, Councilor. I found the young man, here, who wrote that letter."

"Greetings, Guardian," the senator signed. "I see. He looks nervous."

Indeed, Virgil was squirming, looking around the room and still calculating ways to escape, but the old man's left hand resting firmly on his shoulder kept him in place.

"He agreed to be my student," the old man went on. "Will any consequences happen for him?"

"Since this will happen…" the senator signed, looking at Virgil, who squirmed even more under the senator's burning familiar glare. "…the Clerc government has decided to forgive his crimes upon his taking the title of Guardian. If he is under your protection, then we will not touch him."

Virgil breathed out a gust of relief.

The senator and the old man discussed a few things, and then the conversation ended.

Then the old man looked at Virgil. "Do you need to use the bathroom?"

Virgil bared his teeth. "I'm not age five!"

The old man raised his eyebrows a bit.

"I thought I was dead or about to go to prison!" Virgil stood up in objection. "I thought I was done with them after sending that stupid letter!"

The old man waited for Virgil to calm down. Then he got up and left the room. Virgil followed.

He entered another room. This room had a table, two chairs and a kitchenette in it. They sat down.

The old man signed, "You may call me S-h-a-w-n, Shawn." He spelled it then signed his namesign, an S tapping his chin. "V-i-r-g-i-l. I know your name, but not your namesign."

Virgil leaned back. "Sorry. When I'm ready, I'll tell you."

The old man—Shawn—looked taken aback. Then he signed, "I see. You keep to yourself. Now I need to explain to you about your job, what you have to do."

Virgil nodded, his chin in his hands and his elbows resting on the table.

"You are a judge, and the world is your courtroom."

Virgil's lower lip stuck out and his eyebrows furrowed. "...what?"

"Let me explain some history first." Shawn began: "Many years ago, on Old Earth, in the Dark Ages of Deaf civilization, deaf people were afraid for their culture. Hearing people always came in and tried to destroy their culture by doing what? Making them hearing."

Virgil laughed at this, his head tilted back. When Shawn frowned, he signed, "Sorry. The hearing people I knew, when I was a kid, they were afraid of deaf people. It's nice to see it be the other way around."

"In the twenty-second century, deaf people and other disabled people were sent to this special planet for disabled people called Ray. In the deaf cities on Ray, many people

discussed creating a deaf world, like the one from deaf myth, but they didn't do anything. Then Zen Daniels came in and started his campaign for a deaf planet, and he succeeded." The sign for Zen Daniels had a flair indicating greatness.

Virgil perked up at the mention of Zen Daniels.

"At that first Committee meeting, Zen Daniels explained that he wanted Eyeth to stay limited to deaf people only. He explained how, long ago, deaf people had been oppressed before by hearing people, forced to become hearing with painful operations, and he didn't want that to happen again. The Committee agreed and they worked on a plan to stop all that from happening again here on Eyeth. This plan Zen Daniels had in mind was to have someone watch over Eyeth. 'Just like we Guardians watched over Ray and made sure our world was safe, another Guardian will watch over Eyeth,' Zen Daniels signed to the Committee.

"The position of Guardian was created. This Guardian would travel all over Eyeth. Once every ten years, he would report about his Decisions and what had to be done to curb any dangers to Deaf civilization."

Virgil noticed that the flairs, most notably the expression, which Shawn added when he signed "Decisions," were reserved for important and formal occasions.

"This Guardian would judge the world, his courtroom, then present his judgments and rulings. He was supposed to keep the world in balance.

"You see? You will be the judge of this world courtroom."

Virgil realized how deadly serious this job was. If there was something bad going on somewhere, and it was hidden from the Guardian, then left unchecked, Deaf civilization itself could crumble. And this old man had recruited him to be his student! Seeing the panicked expression on Virgil's face, Shawn put his hands on Virgil's shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"This job, it's so big," Virgil signed. "When I have it, I'd be like the god of Eyeth. I could do anything I wanted. I can't screw this up. I can't!"

"You're age twenty-one, not age seventeen. You can handle it." Shawn emphasized the sign for age as was normal for Ameslan users.

Virgil squinted his eyes at Shawn, giving him a skeptical look. "Really?"

"You're a very capable young man. You have a vision for the world, and that is required for the job of Guardian."

Virgil slumped, his chin in his hands. Then he looked up and signed, "What else does the Guardian do? Does he wander around and talk to people about how the world's doing?"

"Yes." Shawn looked up for a moment, then back at Virgil. "Let me tell you a story that happened a hundred years ago…"

Chapter II: Cassie & Jody

The Guardian was on one of his trips around the world before making his DECISIONS. On this particular trip, he was called to meet with a group of prospective journalists in England.

It was a beautiful country, located to the south on an archipelago and close to the equator. Many white wooden houses dotted its beaches. Rich Clerkers sailed there for cruises or rented houses there for vacations and snubbed the locals, who were immigrants, native English signers, or signers who didn't feel comfortable in Clerc or Pegasus.

In the capital, Gustafson, he met with the journalists, young college graduates who were vying for a position at the *Londoner*, England's top digi-paper and one of the continent's top publications. The Guardian chatted with the group, then he asked each of them to tell him a story. One young woman told him about a former childhood friend she wanted to get back in touch with. The Guardian saw the most promise in this young woman, named Cassandra Wall, so he arranged to meet with her that night and hear her story:

In the town of York, there lived two girls named Cassie and Jody. Cassie's imagination was as wild as her curly hair, which she always twisted around her fingers while writing some story or thinking. Jody was fidgety, often touching her face with her long tanned fingers. The girls, best friends, had known each other since fifth grade. Jody was a gifted artist, while Cassie was a gifted writer. Together, they were a brilliant team of

cartoonists. They made comics together in high school focusing on the conflicts between the brave heroes and the nefarious N'ts. The N'ts would manipulate the heroes like puppets and the heroes would fight back, breaking free in the end.

Jody asked Cassie what an N't was and Cassie told her it was from some obsolete American English words. Their N't comics were circulated among their friends at school, earning them an invitation to work for their high school newspaper. They made funny comics showing common school situations.

Like many teenage girls, Cassie and Jody's videophone conversations lasted almost all night. They talked about ideas they had, discussed books and movies they liked, and laughed about their inside jokes. They liked different things, but they still discussed them with each other. Cassie read more of Jody's favorite comics and Jody read less of Cassie's favorite novels, but that was how things were.

In her senior year of high school, Cassie was awarded a full scholarship to Blakeley University, a prestigious college in Clerc. It was difficult for Englander students to come to Clerc for educational purposes, so Cassie's award letter also included complex paperwork.

Jody was at Cassie's house, helping her. "Why are you doing this, Cassie?" she signed to her best friend of seven years. "You could go to U of G with me. We could be roommates!"

Cassie frowned over a form. "I got this huge opportunity, Jo!"

"But what about me?" Jody gave Cassie a pout and puppy eyes. "Your best friend in the whole world will miss you." She thought. "Can I hide in your trunk?"

Cassie laughed. "Yes! Then I can hide you under my bed and feed you noodles." They laughed. Then she signed, "We can talk online."

Jody nodded. "But I still want to see you. I will miss drawing our comics together."

This summary and conversation thus far was relayed by one Cassie Wall, recipient of a four-year degree in creative literature from Blakeley University. Miss Wall went on to sign that she and Miss Jody Mailer communicated until her third year of college and that things built up over the years, but three events stood out.

At the end of Cassie's first year away at Blakeley University, she returned to York. The first thing she did was catch up with Jody. After an hour-long videophone conversation, they agreed to meet up at Bristol Park, their usual meeting place growing up. They'd had so many adventures there—sneaking out late at night with boys, trying out homemade fireworks in summer, filmed adventures on the playground and many others.

Cassie rode her black bicycle along the sandy path, knowing that Jody would walk there. Her house was further away from the park than Jody's was, but it was closer to the beach.

Screeching to a halt at the rack, Cassie jumped off and ditched her bicycle when she saw Jody. She ran over to her best friend, waving both arms as she went. Jody also waved back, signing as big as she could, "Hi! Come here!"

When she got close enough, Cassie jumped onto Jody and hugged her. They spun around, hugging and laughing. Then they walked along a path, talking and enjoying seeing each other again.

Jody talked about her first year at U of G, taking introductory art classes. She signed, "I had to draw a naked guy, Cass! Can you believe that?"

"Jo, you had to!" Cassie signed. Then she talked about her introductory classes. "Ameslan is so weird. It has some of the same signs we use, but some are different. I am doing OK with learning it, and I am a lot better now! But I had professors yelling at me for using English signs instead of Ameslan."

Jody only saw the last sentence of what Cassie was signing. "That is stupid. They should let you sign English."

"That is not the point! That university signs Ameslan, not English!" Cassie glared at Jody, but she was staring up at the trees.

Cassie waited for Jody to finish daydreaming, but when Jody looked back at Cassie, she started signing about some new friends.

When Jody paused, Cassie signed, "Those new friends of yours seem cool. Can I meet them sometime?"

Jody shrugged. "Maybe? It is hard to let new people in."

Cassie accepted it with much reluctance. She figured she'd meet those intriguing new friends of Jody's one day.

They walked around the park. Jody had her beat-up green backpack with her, so Cassie asked if she brought a ball. She asked Cassie if she had the poles. Both were

produced, and they ran to a field of short palmgrass. A game of one-on-one pick-up soccer was put into progress.

They darted around the field and their respective goal poles, trying to score. Jody had always been the superior goalie at odds with Cassie's kicking skills, even after almost a year of not playing.

Cassie noticed that Jody's playing seemed off now. After Cassie brought up Ameslan, she seemed tenser, with that tension now showing up in her playing. Cassie wished she'd remembered shin guards, since Jody was aiming the ball straight at her, kicking so hard short points of palmgrass went flying along with the ball.

At one point, when Cassie blocked the ball with her leg, it left a dark bruise on her shin. Cassie put a foot on the top of the ball, signaling a timeout, and signed, "Jody, what is wrong?"

Jody shook her head. "Nothing."

Sweaty strands of Jody's brown wavy hair were sticking to her face and neck. She had worn herself out much more than Cassie had, and it was supposed to be a simple quick game of soccer. Harmless fun. But this harmless fun had left a huge bruise on Cassie's right shin.

Cassie's gaze remained steady. Jody's face was blank. It was when Cassie started picking up the goal poles that Jody came back to life. Her hands stopped Cassie's from pulling them out from the ground.

"I want to keep playing," she signed when Cassie looked up.

Cassie looked at Jody's pleading face. How could she deny her best friend? But her bruise warned her otherwise.

Cassie signed, "No," and pulled both pairs of poles from the ground, ignoring Jody. Then she sat down on a bench.

Soon, Jody joined Cassie, sitting next to her on the bench. They sat in silence until Jody's hands moved: "I am sorry."

Cassie looked at her, unsure. Then she decided to accept the apology. It was only a one-time thing, anyway. They hugged and made up. Since they were tired, they kept talking.

They discussed the latest movies to come out in England and Cassie told her about one cool movie she saw in Clerc. She described a sequence from that movie in English, but the more she got into it, her signs dropped more into Ameslan here and there.

At one point, Jody interrupted her. "What is this?" she signed, then repeated an Ameslan sign Cassie had used that conceptually meant anger in a specific situation.

Cassie explained what it meant.

Jody rolled her eyes. "Then just sign so in the first place! You know I cannot sign Ameslan. Why do you have to use a stupid language anyway?"

Cassie blinked, baffled. She had never heard Jody be this outspoken about Ameslan before. In fact, they almost never spoke of it before Cassie went away to college. "OK. I am sorry. I will not use that again." She swore to herself that she'd make an effort to always sign English around Jody.

At home that night, Cassie kept thinking about what happened. Why had Jody been so upset about Ameslan? It did not make sense. Jody had even told her back in fifth or sixth grade that her family knew a few Clerkers.

Cassie also thought back to her Ameslan courses at Blakeley. She recalled the time where they learned to list things. The professor explained that in English, you signed first, then *x*, meaning whatever was first, then second, then *y*, and so on. But in Ameslan, you ticked things off using your fingers. That lesson stuck with Cassie because she remembered Jody didn't list things that way. Jody did not use "first... second..." like Cassie had. Jody listed things in Ameslan, counting things off on her fingers.

Why did Jody use Ameslan mixed in with her English, then criticize her best friend for using Ameslan? It made no sense at all. Cassie supposed that Jody could have picked up some Ameslan from those Clerker family friends, but what happened to those family friends? Jody had not spoken of them in many years.

The incident was not spoken of again. They had a great summer hanging out together and going to Luau Resorts, the local amusement park, with their unlimited passes. Cassie and Jody's fight over Ameslan versus English went largely forgotten until not long after that year's Settling Anniversary.

In Cassie's second year of college, she came home to England for winter break. She shivered in her T-shirt and jeans in Clerc, but she was glad for them when she walked off the anti-grav train.

When Cassie walked down to the York train platform, Jody was there to jump on her and hug her.

In the car on the way home, they laughed and talked as if they had not fought six months prior. They discussed their plans for Settling Anniversary, or Setan for short.

"My parents want me to go to church. They want me to celebrate Christmas." Cassie shuddered in horror while signing *Christmas* and Jody nodded in sympathy. Her parents carried over their weird religious traditions when they immigrated from Gallaudet to England. She used to be okay with the whole religion thing until she figured out that the God her parents believed in didn't want her to be deaf, then it was not okay

Jody signed, "Then come celebrate with us!"

Cassie signed, "Setan, yes! I will be there!"

For *Setan*, she used the Ameslan sign instead of the English sign, and at this, Jody signed, "What is this?" and repeated the Ameslan sign.

Cassie signed, "That's S-e-t-a-n..." spelling the word out, then she shrank back in horror when she realized what she had done. "I am sorry, Jo! I did not mean to sign that!" Jody's hazel eyes narrowed as she put the driving system on pause and pulled over her car. "Why did you do that?"

"Jo, I did not mean to! It is a habit!"

"You can stop your awful habits." With that, Jody unpaused the driving system and kept her eyes straight ahead. She wouldn't look even when Cassie was smacking her shoulders instead of tapping.

How could she explain to her best friend that she couldn't help it? Signing in Ameslan felt natural to her now, and Cassie loved her group of friends at Blakeley University. Many of them were fellow literature majors like her, but none of them could replace her Jody. Cassie longed to be able to have her friends and her best friend meet. She could introduce them to her and tell Jody, "See, there are good Clerkers."

Jody had now introduced Cassie to some of her friends. One, Will, took a particular liking to her and they talked a lot over videophone that fall. He was a quiet loner, but he noticed a lot about people.

Jody's hands remained mute the rest of the ride to Cassie's house. She didn't sign good-bye, but she did help Cassie with her bags, not signing a word. As long as Jody was willing to interact, Cassie knew things would be fine.

Will called that night. Cassie expressed her worries about Jody to him. "I do not want her to stay mad at me because I like Clerc."

"I noticed that she has a hard time dealing with Clerkers," Will signed, then he hesitated. Cassie saw it as the hesitation of someone who wants to say something.

"What do you mean?" Cassie signed to her videophone.

Will rubbed the back of his neck. "She told me something…" His hands shaking, he went on to sign that when Jody was younger, on a family vacation to Clerc, she received a lot of unwanted attention from young men. One young man stalked her to the point where her family put a restraining order against him. One night, he broke into Jody's room. He held a knife and threatened Jody with a choice: her virginity or her life. Before she could choose, her older brother intervened.

Cassie's mouth hung open in disbelief.

Will's jaw twitched. "There are bad people in this world..."

They talked for a little bit longer, then Will bade her good night. Cassie sat in the dark, thinking about Jody.

She picked up a plastic hand that sat on her nightstand. It was an old teaching tool of her mother's. Cassie loved playing with it, moving the fingers into different signs. By now, the joints were so worn out that some handshapes refused to stay in place.

She made an I, then moved it in a J, for Jody. She kept moving it around while thinking, holding the pinky in place. No wonder Jody hated Clerkers so much... but why should that force her to hate Cassie for using Ameslan? Just because this bad event happened shouldn't force her to generalize.

Cassie moved the hand around, still thinking. Absent-mindedly, she took the hand through the whole alphabet. Then she bent the hand so that the four fingers were together with the thumb sticking out. With this handshape, she could sign either *good* or *bad*. She laughed when she remembered teaching one of her hearing cousins how to sign. He kept mixing up his signs, twisting the hand down for *good* and bringing it straight down for *bad*. Eventually, her cousin got it right, but it was still funny how close good and bad were. One little action could change the meaning. A lot of little actions could change everything.

She moved the fingers into the shape of a fist. This handshape, with the back of the hand to the viewer and all the fingers hidden, was an Eyeth gesture that meant, "I want to

sign nothing to you." She had seen her dad move an F shape across his closed lips, some weird Gallian gesture, but this one made more sense and meant the same thing.

Cassie studied the hand in the "nothing" gesture. Maybe this was what she should think about Jody's Ameslan hatred. It was nothing big. They were still best friends, weren't they? Something silly like language shouldn't matter that much.

The next day, Cassie waited outside for Jody, decked out in the blue and gold Setan colors and holding presents. Jody's tan Veditz pulled up and the window rolled down. Jody signed, smiling, "Come in!"

Cassie got herself and the presents into the car. Jody struck up conversation, but her best friend was not that interested. Cassie stared out the window at the coconut trees zipping by while Jody's hands moved sans audience.

Upon arrival, Cassie decided that if Jody was wearing a mask, so was she. With smiles, she greeted Jody's family consisting of parents plus two brothers and various relatives, who also greeted her with smiles and hugs. There was much conversation, but it all left her feeling hollow.

Was Jody still angry? How did Jody feel about Cassie's slip-up yesterday? Cassie didn't dare ask and she couldn't tell anything from Jody's cheerful demeanor. Setan passed without anything happening, but Cassie now felt uneasy.

Their friendship continued on unsteady ground for another year, Cassie told the Guardian. Then they had their last fall out.

In Cassie's third year of college, she came home to visit during spring break. She put on a halter top, shorts and flip-flops and went to Jody's house to surprise her. Jody hadn't spoken much to Cassie recently, either online or on the videophone. Cassie was curious about what was going on with her best friend of ten years.

She rang the Mailers' doorbell, and through the rightmost window, she could see lights flashing. Jody should be home now.

After several minutes of Cassie checking her vidglasses twice every minute and looking around, the door opened. Jody, standing there in pajamas and robe, waved, rubbing her eyes. "Hi," she signed.

"Hi!" Cassie signed, grinning. "How are you?"

Jody rubbed her eyes with fists before signing, "I just woke up. Want some breakfast?"

"Yes!"

After Jody made them some rice and got out some cheese, they sat down at the round kitchen table and ate in silence. Not a word was signed until the food was gone. Cassie was waiting for Jody to start their conversation with chatter about her friends and York. But Jody remained silent.

To counter the silence, Cassie babbled. She signed about her friends, her new boyfriend, her studies—anything that would make Jody acknowledge her. Jody did respond, but only through small polite replies, like, "Are they nice?" or "That is good."

Cassie kept on. There had to be a way to break through. She was growing frustrated. Why wasn't her best friend responsive? There was one thing left to do: piss her off.

Jody still stared nowhere, but her eyes did flicker to Cassie every now and then. Cassie's hands switched from English to Ameslan with little fumbling. Now Jody's eyes were fixed on Cassie, growing wide with anger.

Cassie continued babbling, watching Jody become angrier. "Friend J-a-c-k, he cool guy. He collect comics, toys. We tease him, saying he little boy, refuse grow up. But him, he sign—"

Jody stood up and signed the one word that would send Cassie's babbling screeching to a halt: "Stop."

Cassie stared, gaping. She hadn't expected Jody to snap so soon.

Jody continued: "That country changed you. You keep talking about Clerc so much and how you want to be with your friends. You are not the Cassie I know anymore."

Cassie's hands stammered in their movements, like a broken laser display flickering, as she signed. "I am sorry. I changed."

Jody's eyes hardened. "Get out of here. I do not want you around here anymore."

She cried all the way walking back home.

In the park, Cassie told the Guardian, "I did love my friend Jody. I saw her as my sister. We were so close in middle and high school. If I knew going away to college would

have changed me so much, I wouldn't have gone." She wiped some tears away. "We have not talked for over a year now. I just want to talk to her again."

The Guardian laced his hands together, thinking. Then he pulled them apart and signed, "Do you think she would be willing to come and talk to you?"

Cassie looked down at the palmgrass. "I just want to set things straight."

"We can try. I think you'd do great at the *Londoner*. I'll recommend you there and help you out with this." He turned his vidglasses on and selected the summons note application. He signed out the note for Cassie's benefit, then asked for Jody Mailer's address. After all the information was noted, the summons was sent. As he told Cassie, it was up to Jody to accept the summons.

Chapter III: Reflections, I

Virgil sight-listened to Shawn, throwing in his own comments. When Shawn talked about the stigma against Englanders, Virgil scoffed. He signed, "Clerkers are idiots, of course. They always look down on those who don't sign their language."

He frowned when Shawn signed about Cassie's and Jody's friendship ending. He hadn't had much personal experience with friendships himself, having only Royal, but he had witnessed enough to have some good knowledge on the subject. In a normal situation, it took a lot to tear best friends apart. Then again, he didn't know a lot about Cassie or Jody. His hands stayed down.

When Shawn mentioned Cassie and Jody playing soccer, Virgil had to repeat Shawn's archaic sign. "Soccer?"

"Your name for it is football," Shawn signed, using the modern sign.

Jody's kicking the ball bruised Cassie's shin and Virgil's lips thinned to a line. He signed, "Friends don't do that crap."

Shawn signed, "No. Cassie knew that."

Cassie mentally criticized Jody for her hypocrisy towards Ameslan. "Something's definitely wrong with Jody," Virgil signed. "Is her mind screwed up? I don't think she should act like that with her 'best friend'." He thought something was wrong with Jody if something had come between her and her own supposed best friend.

"At that time, the Guardian thought Clerkers gave Jody bad memories. Listen, please." Shawn continued with his story. Shawn described Jody's friend Will.

"Now there's a man I wouldn't mind sharing observations with."

His teacher had to laugh.

Virgil scowled and signed, his hands like quicksilver, "What's so funny?"

Shawn signed, "Will was about your age one hundred years ago." Virgil's face fell.

Cassie played with the plastic hand, trying to understand her best friend's problems. "Makes sense," Virgil signed. "It's a psychological thing... a reaction is trained into you for something, and that reaction can spread to related things. Clerkers use Ameslan. Of course Jody's angry about Ameslan."

Shawn nodded. "Cassie didn't know that. She was around age twenty at this time and not as wise as you."

Cassie thought language shouldn't matter so much in her and Jody's friendship. As an aside, Shawn signed, "She later told me she regretted that. By then, it was too late."

Virgil signed, "If it was me, I would have apologized. But then again, I don't have many friends..." His hands trailed off in regret.

Jody made Cassie feel uneasy. "She should stop being friends with Jody," Virgil signed. "I mean, what's the point? Cassie keeps pissing Jody off, no matter what. I don't think Jody likes Cassie anymore."

Shawn signed, "You notice Jody likes masks? That's important."

Cassie wanted to piss off Jody to get her attention. Virgil shook his head in disgust. "She could have found a better way to get through to Jody."

"I agree. As the Old Earth saying goes, it's better to catch flies with honey than vinegar."

"What the hell is f-l-i-e-s?"

"Wingsies. It's better to be sweet than to be mean."

Cassie cried walking home and Virgil's eyes were soft gray with sympathy. "It's hard to lose a friend."

After Shawn finished, Virgil signed, "So did they get the chance to talk?"

Shawn held up his hands. "Patience. I will discuss that. First, do you think that was the correct thing to do?"

Virgil frowned and shook his head.

"Why not?"

"I know they used to be best friends, but Cassie has to accept that Jody doesn't want to be friends with her anymore. She has to move on from that, why? She'd hurt both herself and Jody if she kept wanting to talk to her. You should have told her that." Virgil was still frowning. He didn't understand why the Guardian had arranged a summons for Jody. It was impolite to refuse a summons from the Guardian of Eyeth himself, and Jody didn't seem like the kind of person who would dare turn that down. Or was that what Cassie had wanted all along? If she wanted to do that for that reason, then she was a coward.

"Yes, she did have to accept that. But as a Guardian, my job isn't to do that. My job is to make both people and the world happy."

"What the hell kind of job is that?!" Virgil signed, his hands moving like quicksilver like they always did when he was angry. "I thought the Guardian was supposed to do the best for Eyeth, not make people happy!"

"If you were the Guardian, what would you have done?"

"I would have told her it was clear Jody didn't want to be friends anymore. I would tell her to think on their friendship and realize she needs to move on."

"That's something you would tell a friend, not a client. You would have an upset client plus an upset Council. Do you want to leave the people you're supposed to help in tears?"

"Yes." Virgil didn't sign why because he figured Shawn would object, saying it was better to leave them happy on the surface. If the Guardian was honest with Cassie in that situation, she would have left in tears. But she would also realize that Jody was angry and maybe jealous, so it wasn't a good thing for their friendship to continue. Cassie would have been much better off, even though it would have been harder on her. "What happened? Did Jody show up?"

"She answered the summons."

A young woman was sitting in the rented office when the Guardian entered, wearing his helmet and uniform. She matched Miss Wall's description of Miss Mailer: wavy brown hair, thin stature, hazel eyes—and she was doodling on a pad, something to kill time while waiting. Since she was due to be summoned today, this must be her.

The Guardian waved to get her attention, but she didn't look up. He walked closer and tapped her shoulder. She looked up and flinched, not expecting to see the Guardian himself.

"Miss Mailer?" he signed, using the English sign for her last name and not the Ameslan sign.

"Yes?" she signed.

"Come talk with me. We will discuss the matter of Miss Wall."

Her face darkened, but she didn't sign anything. She followed him to his office and sat down.

The Guardian chatted pleasantly with her about York and the rest of England before moving on to much more serious matters. He asked her more questions about Miss Wall and what Miss Mailer thought of her former best friend.

Miss Mailer admitted that she and Miss Wall were once good friends, but things changed after Miss Wall went away to college. "Blakeley brainwashed her," Miss Mailer signed.

"Many young adults change after leaving home," the Guardian signed. He noticed a mild Ameslan accent in Miss Mailer's expressions and how she held herself, even though her signs were English. "Did you think your friend would come back the same?"

Miss Mailer was silent. Then she signed, "I did not want her involved with those Clerkers. I hate them."

"May I ask why?"

"They gave my family a hard time. My parents were excluded and it was so bad that they could not go anywhere without being mocked. So they left."

"But those were your parents, not you."

"They told me to stay away from them, no matter what. Since my former best friend became one of them, I should stay away from her." Miss Mailer stood up. "Excuse me, I should be going now." She turned and left the office, pad tucked under her arm.

Virgil nodded when Shawn finished. "Seems like something Jody would do. Be nice to the Guardian Why? He has authority. Don't be nice to enemies."

Shawn cocked his head. "Do you think you know Jody?"

"You told me what Cassie said."

"Tell me: was there more to what was bothering Jody? Was it correct for the Guardian to do what he did?"

Virgil thought about it. It was strange, how Jody had such an adverse reaction to Cassie's going away to college. There had to be more to it. "I think Jody was jealous that Cassie got to go somewhere far away, while she had to go to the local college." The jealousy explained why Jody freaked out about Cassie and her leaving. "Then she got mad because Cassie became like one of those people she hated."

"That's reasonable."

"I also think the Guardian did what he thought was correct."

"Cassie went on to be the chief editor at the *Londoner*. Now let's play some football."

Virgil gave him a skeptical look. He played football a lot while traveling since it was a great way to connect without needing language. But why would the Guardian play football?

As it turned out, he played as a boy. Shawn explained that when he was a new arrival, his exemplary skills on the field earned him respect with other boys. "It helped some," Shawn signed one-handed as they walked to a field next to the palace. They had

already changed into T-shirts and shorts, Virgil had put on his sunglasses and the ball was tucked under Shawn's arm.

"New arrival, where?" Virgil signed. He still couldn't get used to this, talking with the man with the most authority in the world like he was a normal person.
Shawn ignored his question, instead kicking the ball out onto the field. Two pairs of goal posts had already been set up on the field, and Shawn was now standing at midfield in the typical starter position for a one-on-one game.

Virgil walked over to the other side of the center line and waited. Shawn kicked the ball and the game went into action.

At first, it was a fair game. Virgil had an advantage with his youth, but Shawn had an advantage with his experience. They were even in ability, and each scored an equal number of goals.

Then abruptly, Shawn started letting all of Virgil's goals in. Virgil slowed down his playing, not understanding why the old man was doing this. Did he get tired? Did he decide to give up?

Virgil decided to take it easier on him, since he was acting so off all of a sudden. He slowed down his playing. But now since he was slow to send goals and Shawn wouldn't send any back, their playing slowed to a standstill.

Then Shawn launched forward and kicked the ball between Virgil's goalposts. Virgil had to step up his playing to counter Shawn's increased aggressiveness. Shawn persisted so much with the goals that Virgil caved and let him kick many of them in.

After Virgil flopped onto the grass, Shawn stood over him. "Finished?"

Panting, Virgil signed, "Yes."

"Why?"

"Not fair."

"Good."

They returned indoors. A late lunch awaited them there.

After they finished, they sat back and Shawn signed, "Let me explain our game to you." He pressed a button, making two hidden panels in the wall slide open and reveal a screen, with a small laser display below. Shawn pushed some things around in the display before a simple diagram popped up on the screen.

Two figures, one red and the other blue, appeared on a black background. A green diamond stood between them. Shawn pointed to the diagram. "First part of our game is shown here. We both scored an even number of goals." He pushed away a shape on the display. The diamond was now halved into an arrow that pointed to the red figure on the left. "The second part of our game is here. In this game, you had the advantage. I let you win."

There had been a reason that game felt so odd to Virgil.

Shawn flipped the shape over. Now the arrow pointed to the blue figure. Virgil signed, "Let me guess—you were supposed to win?"

"Yes." The display and screen were cleared with a swipe. Shawn faced Virgil. "Do you understand why it's so important to be equal?"

Virgil nodded. He had seen that in real life many times, but he wasn't going to tell that to this old man who had seen everything in between years of doing nothing. "But what's the connection between this and what the Guardian did with Cassie and Jody?"

"This is important to remember for conflicts you have to handle, not just between people but also between countries. The Guardian wanted things to be equal between Cassie and him. If the Guardian told Cassie to forget it, that Jody wanted nothing to do with her, then she would be upset. In that situation, the Guardian has the advantage because he isn't affected by emotions."

Virgil was starting to understand. By showing Cassie that Jody didn't want to talk, then Cassie could be more at peace with herself. By telling Cassie that Jody didn't want to talk, Cassie would think of the Guardian as heartless and be more desperate to contact Jody. It was more complex when it came to dealings between countries, but the basic concept was there.

"See now?"

"Yeah." Virgil's eyes shone a little brighter blue than usual. "You have to keep both sides happy."

"That's just an example. I have to do higher-level things most of the time," Shawn signed. "You solved any problems before?"

"My baby sister." Virgil smiled.

Bea, three years younger, wanted her big brother to fix everything for her. Virgil helped Bea with everything from an owie on her knee to a lost Miss Deaf Americana

figure. She was the only one who cried when Virgil left home. Her big brother couldn't solve that problem for her because this time, he was the problem.

One time, when she was in first grade, Bea had a problem with a bully picking on and stealing from her. Virgil's and Bea's father told his children that whenever a bully problem came up, they should go talk to an adult. The adults refused to help five-year-olds solve their problems, so Bea came to her big brother for help.

Virgil told Bea to fight back if she picked on her again. If there were more problems, Virgil would take care of it.

At school, Bea faced down the bully with as much bravado as a girl age five could muster and told her, "If you won't leave me alone, then my big brother Gil will get you!" They had a short round of fisticuffs, but the threat and Bea standing up for herself had some effect. She left Bea alone after that.

"How did you do that?" Shawn signed, impressed. "You were around eight?"

"Yes," Virgil signed. "But I liked to watch people. My ears started breaking when I was around four. I couldn't hear people that well after a point, so I observed them, how they acted, so I knew how to act. I've had ten, fifteen years' worth of observing. Why? I was an isolated kid. What else could I do?"

"You were isolated?" Shawn signed, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes. Gallians, they don't like people with broken ears like me too much." Virgil shrugged one shoulder in a what-can-I-do way.

"From Gallaudet... interesting. How did I find another person who was isolated while young?" Shawn signed about his similar isolated experience. He was presumably

born deaf, as he'd had two older sisters who were also deaf. But his older brother was hearing, so he had the privilege of being out and about in the world. His older brother also ignored his sisters and Shawn.

Shawn was age five when he left and went to a place with others like him. "Were you from Gallaudet too?" Virgil asked, interested. He'd sight-heard of a few stories similar to Shawn's. Some hearing parents hid away their deaf children in shame, but Virgil was fortunate to be banished.

"Elsewhere. You've had a long day today."

As Virgil was led away to his new room, he wondered where Shawn's "elsewhere" was, if he wasn't from Gallaudet. Was he from a hearing country on a different continent? His accent was weird too. It was off in a way he couldn't place. It seemed old-fashioned, but it didn't match any he knew.

On the whole, the Guardian seemed like one of the oddest people he had ever met on Eyeth, and Virgil had met many people. Plus how he used that archaic sign for Zonia still bothered Virgil. The Guardian used it with the greatest of ease. not stumbling over it like many people would with a sign notation they only saw in dusty books.

Virgil figured he'd know what was up with the Guardian. For now, it was time for him to relax and not think too much about his future.

Chapter IV: From Clerc to Milan

The next morning, Virgil's bed shook. Virgil didn't wake up from his deep sleep. The bed shook for a minute, paused, then shook again, harder. The vibrations eventually dumped Virgil's sleeping form onto the floor.

Virgil woke up to a sore head. When he found the culprit—a ShakeTron 3000 lurking under his bed—he scowled. He needed an alarm with lights, not vibration. It was weird how sunlight gave him headaches, yet strobe lights didn't bother him.

In the wardrobe, he found new clothes. It'd been ten years since he'd had this much clothing. After picking out a plaid shirt and some pants and then putting his everyday traveler's essentials in his pockets, which included important things like a compass and his sunglasses, Virgil walked downstairs from his room to the cafeteria. He would need to have a word with Shawn about that stupid ShakeTron 3000.

An android servant asked him what he wanted for breakfast. Virgil ordered bacon, eggs, some bread rolls and cheese. He was stuffing the cheese plus the remaining bacon into the hollowed-out rolls when Shawn arrived.

With a bemused expression, Shawn looked at the rolls then at Virgil, who had roll guts stuffing his mouth.

"What?"

"Finish your breakfast. We need to talk. Meet me in the Rivalry Room. If you need help, ask." Shawn turned and left.

The only comment he had given was his look at Virgil's breakfast. Virgil didn't even get a chance to mention the alarm.

Virgil wrapped up some rolls and stuffed them into some of his side pockets. A traveler never knew when he would be without food.

After some wandering, Virgil found the Rivalry Room. It was in a hall decorated with the Guardian colors of blue and yellow. He recognized other countries' flags on various doors in the hall.

Most of the doors' flags were horizontal and centered on the door, but that wasn't the case for the flags on the Rivalry Room's door. The flags for Milan and Clerc were side by side and vertical, with a black vertical line in between, denoting enemies. Virgil saw another door that had the Pegasus and England flags with a horizontal dash, denoting friendship, between them, so this door wasn't the only one with symbolic decoration.

Virgil entered the Rivalry Room to see a living room. Various armchairs and couches were arranged in a circle. Shawn was sitting in one of the armchairs, staring up at the ceiling. Maps, both touchscreens and holograms, covered the walls, with a placard below each showing the year in Eyeth and Old Earth notation. Virgil looked at the oldest map, which was on an ancient touch screen and had the notations of Eyeth year 12 and Old Earth year 2117.

He examined it, fascinated. The ring of Europa was divided into larger groups than now. Clerc was there and so was Milan. The archipelago on the lower left of Americana was labeled as "settlement of SEE." Later, the name would be changed to England.

Virgil looked right, and Shawn was standing there, looking wistful.
His hand hovered over Clerc, looking larger than in its current map. "When this map here was made, Zen Daniels was around age thirties."

How could he know that? "But that's over age three hundred."

His teacher's hands didn't form a reply. Instead, he returned to his armchair and looked at Virgil. "Welcome. Sit, please."

Virgil obeyed, sitting in another armchair, and then he asked in sign, "Why am I here?"

"You are here to listen to more stories. First, I must tell you of Milan..."

Milan was at the top right of the continent of Americana. It was a beautiful country of plains, with cliffs on the coast and hills to the south. Native Lanners spoke and rejected sign. They also relied on technology to a significant degree to help their hearing. It was this huge reliance that gave it such a boost in the technology industry. Milan was best known for its advances in the field of technology, and it had a very promising future there on a galactic level.

When Eyeth was first established, a group of people who used Cued Speech were grouped with the orally deaf people who would go on to found Milan. This group of cuers would, in the first century of Eyeth's history, break off to found their own country called Q and call themselves Quicks.

While the people from Q were still part of Milan, their fellow Lanners respected them. They left them alone in their own communities within the Lanner cities. Milan allowed them to use cued speech until Clerc's rise to power. There were a few people who spoke out against those who used their hands in Milan, of course, before Clerc came into

the picture, but those were a few. In Eyeth's earliest days, the people of Clerc and Milan, respectively, kept to themselves.

The people in those countries swore not to speak to each other after completing their goal of a deaf world, but they had other reasons for not talking. In those days, people stayed in their respective countries and didn't need to go to others. There were isolated pockets all over Eyeth that were connected by a network of news and information. These pockets would later grow into countries seeking control.

After Clerc invaded Milan, Milan shut down its borders, making worldwide news. Around this time, a ten-year-old boy named Peter Washington was taken by his mother, Lucy, to her homeland of Milan after things didn't work out with his Clerker father. After entering the country, the first place they went was a gray concrete building in the middle of town with the words "TECH CENTER" out front. A woman whisked Lucy away, and another woman came for Peter.

When she signed, it was slow and mechanical. "You from Clerc, yes?"

Peter nodded, scowling.

"You need aids. I measure."

She gave him an audiogram, like the mandatory one he had gotten at five. Then she used a weird machine that sent electronic probes scuttling into his ears and scuttling back out a few minutes later.

"What those for?" he signed.

"Measure ears."

After a few more diagnostic tests, the woman squeezed small metal balls into Peter's ears, which moved inside and made him flinch. "What that?" he signed. He was told to sit still. After a few minutes, the balls crawled out.

Peter was sent back to where his mother was waiting and the woman spoke to his mother for a minute. His mother turned to him, excited. "You'll be getting your new aids soon! Isn't that great?" Peter's scowl grew deeper.

Sure enough, the next day, he had a mold, which matched the shape of the inside of his ear, inserted. After they were turned on and put inside, they sent waves of static through his eardrums, which made him wince and try to pull them back out.

"Don't do that!" his mother insisted. "I didn't like it either when I first got them. My parents said they had to keep putting them back in! But you will get used to it."

To make his mother happy, Peter obliged. He would still pull them out when she wasn't around. She would figure it out and come zooming back, pulling them out of his pockets and shoving them back in.

A week after receiving his aids, he went on a bus to the local middle school. Peter was assisted by the principal, who spoke slow but with words Peter couldn't understand. But he knew to follow the principal's lead. He followed him down a hall to a classroom labeled in the Milan language. The language here had the same alphabet as the one used in England, and it looked very similar to English.

A lot of people here had aids too, Peter noticed. Some of them had very small ones like his, but others had their ears filled with a shiny substance. A few had flat magnetic disks attaching directly to their head.

He sat down in the classroom, the principal spoke and then left. The teacher spoke. She pointed to him and beckoned. Peter stood up and signed in Ameslan, "Hello, my name Peter. Nice meet you."

The teacher, to his shock, started signing. "We speak here. You have to learn. Why? The rule this country. Do you need tutoring?"

Peter's hands managed to find movement. "Tutor? For-for?"

"Speaking, the language here. Do you know the Roman alphabet? Come. Write your name."

Peter walked over to the whiteboard and wrote his namesign in perfect Ameslan.

The teacher shook her head. "No, spell it out. Letters."

His namesign was his signature, so easy to write out. Individual letters were so much more painstaking to write out than the word. Peter gritted his teeth then wrote out the letters of his name in Ameslan. The teacher pointed to his namesign then spoke. Peter guessed she was explaining it. Then the teacher pointed to the letters of his name and wrote some symbols below them. He could pick out the E's in his name as she pointed out which symbols corresponded to the letters in his name.

Then the teacher turned to him. "I will assign a tutor to you for the Roman alphabet."

Peter was told to sit in the back and read an old Ameslan book left there. It was one of the first translating projects they did on Old Earth, long ago, and the letters were clunkier and harder for him to read. It kept him busy until a dark-haired man wearing a beret came into the room.

Beret walked right up to his desk. When Peter looked up, he signed, "You the Clerker boy?" Peter nodded and he beckoned.

Peter's tutoring started. He learned the basics of the Roman alphabet and how to read words in the alphabet. He had started learning full forms of words in school, so seeing the similarities between Ameslan and Milan English made it easier, but grammar was hard. With patience, his tutor worked with him on that.

Peter spent full days working with his tutor, then less and less time as he learned how to get by. He learned barely enough and his knowledge of the Roman alphabet got him by enough to understand half of what was going on. After one of the boys, Carson, discovered that Peter's mother and grandmother used Cued Speech like his family did, he decided to help Peter.

After Clerc's invasion, his family was starting to fear for their lives. As he explained it, "My family moves their hands when we speak, and Lanners don't like that." Carson taught Peter which sounds went with which letter in the Roman alphabet, using the cueing that Peter was familiar with as a guide. Peter got confused after learning that more than one sound matched a letter and Carson said he would learn.

He did learn, thanks to Carson and his friends. He joined their group of friends and they were his comrades throughout middle and high school. They banded together, signed and cued when nobody was looking and most did anything they could to resist speaking.

When they were in high school, Milan was sending out draft cards for the war against Clerc. One boy in their group, Max, wanted to join, but the others were trying to talk him out of it.

"Why bother?" Peter argued, communicating like the others did—a combination of voice and hands. He used his small voice less than the others. "It's futile."

"Futile?" Max didn't understand the word.

"Useless. Milan's losin'."

"Your home is winnin'." Max stood up. "But I say my country will rise up and win against those who suck."

"Suck?" Peter jumped up. "How can you say that?"

"We can march into battle holdin' our guns and we don't have to be on the visual alert all the time." Max's walk turned into a swagger and his Lanner accent deepened, slurring more words. "We can hear orders an' obey ryaway. We don't have to look for our leader all da time."

"We ain't scared by guns goin' off," Peter jeered. Max shrank back.

A few months earlier, the group went to a shooting range for Carson's birthday. One man there brought an enormous gun and fired it. Most of the boys ducked. Peter didn't understand why Max screamed and dove to the ground while he and one other boy only blinked, startled by the booming vibration. Carson explained that most of them could hear how loud it was. That incident showed Peter how hearing was overrated.

Max bounced back: "We can sense more than you can."

"You're blind compared to me. You can't see as well as I can."

Carson stepped in, walking between both. "Stop." When both were looking at him and he could see them, he said, cueing for Peter's benefit, "This is stupid. War is stupid. Why argue?"

Max wouldn't have it. "He's being a stupid Clerker!"

Peter raised his voice as much as he could. "And you're being a stupid Lanner!"

They moved to lunge at each other, but the other boys pulled them apart.

Carson told Peter, "Don't argue with Max. It's not worth it."

Peter knew that. "I guess I miss home."

"Then go back?"

"How? Milan is on lockdown. I can't leave."

"Hmm. There's something you can do." Carson told him about a new movement. His family and various other people were unhappy about being shunned because they used their hands to talk, so they wanted to break off from Milan and establish their own country.

Carson helped with the movement since his father was leading it, so he could invite Peter to get involved. Since Peter was fluent in cueing and he was descended from native cuers, he accepted.

In thirteenth grade, Peter attended weekly meetings with Carson at Daisey College. Carson's father had written a draft of their demands to the Milan government a few years earlier, but they turned him down. Now the committee was discussing how to persuade the government to give them their independence. After running into many obstacles over several years, the committee was on the brink of giving up.

At one meeting, one man cued, "Maybe we should give up and wait. Milan's struggling too much with Clerc now. They don't have the time to listen to us."

Peter, frustrated, pounded his fist on the table. He cued, "Then we should make them listen to us! Why don't we show them who we are? We should march!"

Carson punched a fist into the air. "Yeah! We should march in Clarke!"

They agreed to gather up a group to march in front of the Dome in Clarke, Milan's capital. Other people on the committee knew that tensions from the ongoing war were high, so they agreed with a smaller group to bring weapons in case soldiers took action.

The day arrived. Their vans parked in a street near the Circle, a large area in front of the Dome, the Clarke government building, and they came out. Some walked with compacted and locked hunting rifles shoved down their pants legs. Others who could afford the smaller laser guns hid those in their back pockets.

Carson's father, their leader, led the way. They marched across the Circle, standing out in their brightly-colored clothes, designed to stand out against Milan's neutral color scheme. A group of soldiers in gray battle uniforms standing next to the Dome spotted them and moved forward, taking their guns out. The long line of cuers continued across the circle and to the steps of the Dome, unaware.

As Carson's father went up the steps, Peter, who was at the back, saw a soldier raise his gun. He raised his curved hands to his mouth and hollered a warning foghorn.

Other people noticed. There was a ripple effect as the armed company in line took out their guns and moved closer to the soldiers and the unarmed moved behind them.

Carson's father continued into the Dome itself, unaware of the attack unfolding behind him.

When he returned, bright red blood was spilled on the Circle's white cobblestones. There were more dead soldiers than dead cuers. The people assembled were looking at him with grim expressions.

He went to ask the people in government personally about their group of cuers breaking off from Milan, but they turned him down again. So the new plan was war.

Those cuers who were in the Milan military left, establishing the cueing army for their cause. Over several months, the veterans trained eager volunteers in a basic knowledge of weapons and tactics. The commanders, all veterans, assembled a system of signals using combinations of cues that wouldn't be decipherable to anyone who knew cueing. Each command was assigned a cued nonsense words, and then those commands were taught to their soldiers. The volunteers-turned-soldiers slowly picked up on those commands as they trained.

Peter was their motivational speaker. The day before the first of their three battles with Milan, he cued to them: "You all are here because you want to fight. You want to fight because you want your own country, to be separate from those who look down on you for using your hands."

A chorus of yeses answered him, soldiers all touching a V-hand to their chin then moving it away, now with the index finger touching the thumb.

"Many years ago, a man named Zen Daniels was like you. He wanted a place of his own. He gathered a group of people, they fought and they succeeded. And you will succeed against Milan today! Go, win this battle! Win for your country!"

The cueing soldiers would go on to win all three of their battles, despite their inexperience. It helped that Milan was already exhausted from other battles with Clerc. After the third battle finished, Milan gave in. The president of Milan met with Carson's father and they agreed on which part of Milan would split off into the new country.

Carson's father held a ceremony in the capital, Cornett, three months later. "I now call this country Q," he cued, two fingers moving down into a V.

Shawn talked about Lanners and Virgil sneered. "I don't like Lanners."

"Why?"

"They hate me for signing."

"They didn't always hate those who communicated using their hands."

At the mention of Q, Virgil's face lit up. "I remember the people of Q, Quicks," he signed with a grin. "Great people. They cued, which was like this..." and he moved his left hand in a fast circle in front of his left cheek while quickly waving the fingers. "I kind of picked some up, but now I forgot. Why were they with Milan?"

"Some spoke, so people assumed they were also oral. That wasn't true, so they broke off from Milan."

The network between the various countries was brought up. "They had the Network, same as today?"

"Yes. They published their newspapers through the Network and communicated worldwide that way."

Peter struggled with getting his ears tested and Virgil understood. "I had to do that to fit in while I lived in Hubbard. I didn't like it."

"Why not? I knew someone who had them when he was small and he was fine."

Virgil raised his eyebrows in skepticism. "Did he toss the aids?"

"When he went into space with me, they threw away his hearing aids."

Peter had to write out his name in the Roman alphabet, something Virgil didn't understand. "I've never heard of the Roman alphabet. What's that?"

"Now it's called the Anglo alphabet. It represents letters in English and other languages."

"Makes sense. The Anglo alphabet for spoken languages and the Si5 alphabet for signed languages." Carson wanted his friends to stop arguing and Virgil nodded in agreement. "Both are stupid."

"They're age sixteen. They don't know any better."

"It's stupid that Clerc went on a power trip and destroyed the world."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Just listen."

Peter was worried about returning home and Virgil scoffed. "A barrier never stopped me," he signed. "Clerc was on limited lockdown when I got in."

"Those were different times. A stubborn young man may have gotten in, but he also risked being drafted into a hopeless war."

Carson talked about how his people wanted to break off and Virgil shook his head. "They shouldn't have been clumped together with those oralists in the first place. Those Quicks are too good to be stuck with those Lanners."

"It wouldn't have happened if they weren't in such a hurry."

He finished and Virgil was impressed. "That's how they started..." he signed, amazed. "The Quicks accepted all for a reason. Why? They've been pushed down before and they know how that feels. They sympathize."

Shawn signed, "After the Clerker Empire dissolved, Q needed the least help adjusting, compared to other countries in Americana like, for example, Milan and Pegasus."

Virgil looked at the map which Shawn had shown him. "What year did Clerc fall?"

Shawn looked too, his greenish eyes wistful. "The dissolving was in... 2247, or Eyeth year 142 for you."

That was more than a century and a half earlier. "Milan is still isolated. Why?"

"There's a reason for that. A long-ago governor made a decision to indefinitely keep Milan's ways Lanner ways. Let me tell you her story. After Peter moved back to Milan with his wife to take care of his mother, they had a daughter..."

Chapter V: From Milan to Clerc

Claire Washington spent the first thirteen years of her life in Milan, talking with her peers and hiding that she signed and cued at home. One day when she got home, her parents announced that they were moving, having finally gotten the permit they struggled to get for fifteen years.

She broke down into tears, sobbing, "No! I don't want to leave my friends!"

They soothed her, signing that it would be all right. She still refused to believe them and barricaded herself in her room.

While Claire was in seclusion, everything in the house was packed up. Upon emerging from her room, she was ordered to pack up as well. Claire begged for permission to at least say goodbye to her closest friends.

Her friend Dax came to her house and picked her up. He set the address for a local air sports place in the car's GPS, then told her that they were having a goodbye party. Claire had to wipe away a tear at that. Of course her friends would be that thoughtful.

When they arrived, she squealed when she saw her closest friends: David, Samantha, Emma, Sarah. Her dearest friends. She had grown up with Dax and Sam, known David and Sarah since elementary school and worked closely with Emma on student council. These were the people she would miss most when she had to leave. About twenty of her other acquaintances were there as well.

They had fun jumping around on the various trampolines and in the anti-gravity simulators and rolling around on the mats and foam pits. It was enough to temporarily

distract Claire from her new reality. After everyone was almost worn out, they ate and talked.

Claire got her friends' numbers and Network addresses in case the numbers didn't work. Emma warned her that Clerc didn't have reception for Lanner and Quick phones, so it would be better to talk through the Network. Claire saved the numbers anyway for memory's sake and told them she'd set up Telfono when she got there so she could talk to them via Network. Then Dax drove her home.

The last thing he said to her in person was, "Call me if anything comes up."

After the last of the goodbyes were said and the last of the boxes were moved, the Washington family left. They arrived a few days later, being slowed down by the line to enter the country. While the boxes were moved into their new house, Peter told Claire to go ahead and look around the neighborhood.

Claire ventured out onto their new street, her eyes darting back and forth and her ears, stuffed with hearing aids, perked up to catch anything.

A group of boys in neon-colored clothes were playing basketball on a driveway and saw Claire in her fashionable neutrally-colored clothes. Their loud laughter made her clamp her hands over her ears.

One of them jeered in Ameslan, "Look, a stupid mouthflapper! Hey! You all know what we must do for our country?"

Before she knew what was happening, the boys all rushed towards her. They knocked her down, tackling her to the ground. While a few held her down, one wedged

his fingers around the aids in her ears and yanked them out. They were flung far away and Claire cried. Why were they pushing her?

They jeered at her, mocking her for being a stupid mouthflapper. Claire screamed at them, "You're a bunch of idiots! Only monkeys use their hands!"

The boys looked at each other and shrugged. They didn't understand her spoken insults, but she could understand theirs. That was what hurt so much, more than the silence ringing in her ears. Claire got up and ran home, in tears the whole way.

Upon her arrival, her mother tried to comfort her. "It's okay, dear. You needed to get rid of those aids anyway..."

No! She didn't want to get rid of them! They were her gateway to the whole wide world. Without them, she felt so lost. The world, silenced, was a scary and eerie place. There was no comforting sound in the background. Her parents couldn't understand. They hadn't grown up surrounded by sound. They weren't aware of how terrifying silence was.

She cried herself to sleep that night. In the morning, her parents dragged her out of bed. Since she had a basic understanding of Ameslan, she could go straight back to school. Claire was sent off on the bus to high school with her backpack, lunch and fears.

At her high school back in Milan, Claire was outgoing and talkative. But here in this Massieu high school, she was withdrawn. She didn't want to sign to anyone, for fear of exposing her abilities like she had yesterday.

People still talked about her. Out of the corner of her eye, Claire saw people signing her last name with either wonder or contempt. Some were impressed that her

father helped found Q, but others were angry that he didn't stay faithful to his home country.

Claire kept to herself, sitting down alone to lunch. But another girl joined her, sitting across from her. "Hi!" she waved. "My name's Maria. Yours?"

"C-l-a-i-r-e," she spelled, smiling tentatively.

Maria signed that she was in eleventh grade and that Claire could join her and her friends. Claire signed that sounded great. Maria didn't comment on Claire's signing, so she was able to relax.

Sure enough, when Claire joined Maria and her friends, she had more fun. A few of Maria's friends were able to help Claire update her signing skills. She started to think that maybe Clerc wouldn't be so bad if she had those friends.

Two years later, she still had her friends, but she wasn't so sure about Clerc anymore. Once she was out with her mother and a man spat on her when she opened her mouth to speak. Her mother was shocked. "Why didn't you sign?"

"Why should I?" Claire signed. "He wanted a reaction. I won't give him that, no! I know people who love and accept me here."

But this happiness wouldn't last long. The year Claire entered tenth grade, Maria entered twelfth. Maria told Claire that this would be her last year and Claire was surprised. "I thought you had another year left?" In Milan, education went from three years' worth of preschool to thirteenth grade, with college being optional. College was emphasized more in Clerc.

Maria laughed and signed, "No, twelfth grade is the last year." Then she explained that Clerc education went from first to twelfth grade, with preschool optional. "Some people dropped out last year on their sixteenth birthdays, but I wanted to go to college."

Claire was saddened. She hoped she would have three years, not two, with Maria. By now, near the end of tenth grade for her, she was making a few more friends, but she was closer friends with her group.

Most of Maria's group graduated that year, leaving behind Claire plus a girl named Louisa to continue the legacy. Louisa didn't like her, so Claire was left alone in eleventh grade with a few acquaintances.

She tried to get closer to them, but they weren't as nice as Maria and her group. For the rest of her high school days, Claire suffered. School sucked, but friends had made it great. Now she had none.

In the middle of eleventh grade, some people spread a rumor that she was an undercover Lanner spy sent to spread her evil oralist ways. When Claire first heard the rumor, she had to laugh. But a lot of people believed it. Many shunned her.

Claire got used to being careful about opening her locker after it was booby-trapped so many times. She got used to ducking in the halls and keeping a low profile so people wouldn't bother her so much. She focused on her studies, forcing herself to excel. If she excelled, then people wouldn't think of her as a freak.

Her parents noticed that she was much quieter than usual and asked her one night what was wrong. Claire lied, "Nothing's wrong." They let it slide.

The rumors persisted so much that during the summer before she was to enter twelfth grade, a Clerker police car pulled up to her parents' house.

After a cop pressed the doorlight, Claire's father answered and got a shock. "Who you here for-for?"

"Miss Claire Washington," the cop read off a piece of paper. "For, what, charges of, first, treason and second, spying." He and a few other cops forced their way in and went upstairs to Claire's room. While she was handcuffed, her rights were read to her. Then she was dragged out the door to the police car while her mother cried in her father's arms and her father demanded to know what on Eyeth his daughter had done. The police only signed they would release her, pending investigation.

The seventeen-year-old girl was taken to the station. After a night in the jail, she was taken to an investigation room the next morning. A group of suited men sat there in a semicircle.

Each of the men threw questions at her many of which she couldn't answer. The questions were about people involved with the Milan government. They once asked about someone named Pike. Claire thought about saying yes (what had happened to her friend David?) but decided not to say anything. After she couldn't answer most of their questions, the men decided to release her. It was a rumor meant to ruin a Lanner's reputation, and being a Lanner in Clerc was never easy.

They released her to her parents, with apologies and an explanation. Claire curled up in her room for several days, refusing to come out. Her father finally came into her room and asked what was wrong.

Claire explained how she was so lonely at school. Her father nodded, understanding, and cued, speaking, "Maybe when you're age nineteen, you can go back to Milan for college." Nineteen was the minimum college age for Milan, but in Clerc, it was seventeen.

"I want to finish, but I don't want to go back," Claire signed, sniffling.

"You have to finish your education," he cued before getting up and leaving.

Claire went on the Network and did some research. She could take Clerc's high school exit exam and pass, which would automatically grant her a diploma. She could go on to college right away if she wanted.

Instead of twelfth grade, Claire passed the exit exam and entered a local college a few hours away from her parents' home. She was initially a history major, but during her second year, she took a few law courses and fell in love, changing her major to pre-law.

One day her senior year, one of her old Lanner friends contacted her through Telfono. Claire, surprised, accepted a call from a Dax T. A dark-haired young man's face showed up on her screen and Claire waved, remembering him.

Claire knew Dax as very laid-back and confident, the boy who'd always been there for her growing up. But he didn't look laid-back and confident now. His eyes were darting back and forth and his shoulders were hunched up. He held up a paper that read in Lanner English, "YORE IMPORTANT. LISTEN." Claire, despite her friend's despondence, had to smile. Dax had forever told her she would change the world, despite her laughing protests that she wouldn't.

He opened his mouth and Claire held up a finger. "Wait."

She found her aids, a new pair received from her grandparents some years earlier, turned them on and twisted them into her ears. She used her aids to listen to music, and on rare occasions, talk to Lanner friends. Onscreen, Dax wriggled in his seat. After they were turned on, she said, "Okay, listenin' ports activated."

Dax managed a smile. This was an old joke between them. "I can't talk much." He held up another paper that read, "THEY'RE WATCHING ME."

"What's goin' on?" Claire said, leaning closer to the screen.

"Gettin' worse here. You have to come help. They're takin' over."

"Clerc?"

"Shit! Don't say—" Dax's screen blacked out, then a message box said, "User has experienced Network difficulties."

Claire stared at the screen, stunned. What was happening to her beloved home? She had heard about Clerc invading and occupying Milan, but she had no idea how bad it was. They had mentioned David too in her interrogation...

She wanted to make Dax's wish come true, so she resolved to herself: she would get into law school, finish and then go fix her home.

Shawn stopped there. Virgil pounded his fists on his knees in frustration. "Come on! What happened?"

"Claire finished telling the story there to me when she was a law student," Shawn signed. "There's an epilogue, but in pieces."

"Pieces?"

Vats of aid balls being poured into the Venice River.

Lanner children sitting in a classroom, copying the teacher's signs and learning the Si5 alphabet.

The sign on the Speech Therapists' Association building taken down and replaced with a sign for the Linguistics Alliance.

Roman alphabet signs replaced with bilingual signs, the Si5 letters much larger than the Roman letters.

Cars pulled over and talkphones smashed by policemen with mouth bandages tucked into their belts.

A man opening his mouth to reveal that his tongue was cut out. A row of men, women and children, each opening their mouths to reveal the same thing.

Virgil shook his head in pity when he sight-heard about the assault on Claire. "When I was a teenager, I saw something like that while traveling in Epée. Sad that kind of thing still continues." After he sight-heard about Claire's insult, he had a half smile on. "She tried to stand up for herself," he signed.

"Bravery has many different forms."

People were angry that Claire's father hadn't stayed faithful to his country. "He was faithful! He came back!"

"Yes. People were angry he grew up in Milan. But he couldn't help that, why, it was his mother's fault."

The subject of mandatory education came up. "Mandatory education until age sixteen is stupid. I got a better education after leaving at age twelve than most people did after age sixteen."

"You're rare."

Claire lied and Virgil frowned. "Maybe her father could have done something about those rumors. He had a reputation."

"Remember, he had a mixed reputation. It may not have worked."

Claire observed that it was never easy to be a Lanner in Clerc. "No shit it ain't. It's not easy to be a Clerker in Milan either. It's hard to be a signer in a speaking country and a speaker in a signing country."

"It's hard to be foreign." Shawn then finished the story. "She went on to become governor of Milan. Her underground revolution was already running. As governor, she established the law that Milan would stick to its original policies, but she worded it how? So Clerc's politicians would accept it."

"She's the one who shaped Milan?" Virgil signed, his eyes wide. In the light of the room, they looked almost green.

"She helped make them what? The technological giant they are now," Shawn signed.

Lanners were all about speaking, true, but the stuff they'd come up with had gone into the realm of aiding hearing and beyond. They were the ones who completely mastered voice recognition, adding adjustments the computer could make for various accents. Lanners were the technological geniuses of Eyeth.

On Eyeth, Clerkers were seen as the leftovers of a broken empire. Beyond Eyeth, they were unknown. They were talented architects, artists and storytellers, but where did that get them? Mentioning Milan Technologies would get a nod of recognition on other planets, but mentioning the Society of Americana Storytellers would get you blank looks.

There was a reason for all that!

Chapter VI: Reflections, II

The vibrations sent out by a bouncing dirty orange and black ball reverberated through the concrete of the roof early one morning.

Shawn had left Virgil alone with his thoughts for a week. Now it was time to come back to these pieces of history.

Virgil, wearing a red jersey, black shorts and sunglasses, bounced the basketball all over the court. He wasn't shooting for the net like most. Instead, he dribbled diagonal one way, then the other way, then alternating vertically up and down the court. He was giving his body a distraction to free up his mind.

Shawn sat on a bench nearby. He knew this man was young, but he also sorely needed wisdom. A lack of wisdom was what had ruined Shawn's earliest days.

Virgil dribbled his ball towards Shawn. He tucked the ball under his right arm and signed with the other hand, "What's happening?"

"Observing."

Virgil tilted his head. "Why?"

"Do you want something to eat? The kitchen can get you anything."

Virgil already knew that. "I want a strawberry sundae." He tossed the basketball. It bounced off the fence and auto-aligned perfectly in the rack. Virgil headed down.

In the cafeteria, Virgil, sunglasses perched on his head, was leaning over the counter, smiling at the girl working there. He signed, "You shouldn't hide your smile."

She took her hand away to reveal her smile and slid the sundae across the counter. He touched her hand when he took it and then winked at her.

Shawn was waiting at one of the tables when Virgil turned around, sundae in hand. Virgil dropped his bowl on the table, making it rattle and send out vibrations, and sat down.

"You're more friendly to her than you are to me," Shawn observed. "That's because you're not a pretty girl. Hi, old man," he signed before digging into his food.

When Virgil looked up, Shawn signed, "I remember everyone once showed me some respect."

Virgil raised an eyebrow. "I thought we were equal here? We're both Guardians."

"I am older than you. Therefore you should be respectful, why? You are younger."

Virgil turned the spoon in his left hand so that it was upright. Then he moved the spoon first horizontally then vertically, like he was scanning a screen, while making a buzzing sound in his throat.

Shawn waited for his apprentice to explain himself.

Virgil put down the spoon and smiled. "Mr. Wright, the trust scan finds you-" here, he jabbed out the sign for *you*, "—WORTHY!"

"You trust me now?"

Virgil shrugged. "I have to, Shawn." For the first time, he used his master's namesign: an S tapping on the chin. "Now I have to show you my namesign too." With the middle finger of his left hand's V lying against his left cheek, his index finger tapped against it a few times.

"Very interesting namesign," Shawn signed. "Mean anything?"

"Does yours?"

"When I was about age-thirties, I received this namesign, replacing the one I had for twenty years. That old namesign didn't fit me, why? I changed too much. I preferred to sit still and observe people. One man I met while traveling, he signed that I was quiet, therefore the S in my name must mean silent. What does yours mean?"

"Slashed smile." Virgil's face twisted into a grimace. Then it cleared and he looked at Shawn, his face bright. "What're we discussing today?"

"Clerc."

They left and went down the Hall of Countries, and into the door with Clerc's flag on it.

A room decorated in a very Clerker scheme greeted them: loud colors, ultrasoft furniture arranged in a circle, and a wide window showing a brilliant green sky.

Shawn told Virgil, "You may look around before we discuss Clerc. I need to review." He took down a worn leather-bound book from one of the built-in shelves.

While he read, Virgil roamed. He saw a row of history books, many he had read during his then-insatiable thirst for anything Clerker as a teenager. Seeing a thick volume titled, "Truth," Virgil took it down.

The last name of the author seemed Gasser, but Virgil wasn't sure. He'd have to ask his Gasser friend Royal. He opened it and skimmed.

The author had a vendetta against Clerc, writing about their heinous crimes and how those crimes were detrimental to Deaf civilization. Virgil read through, memorizing the earliest and latest dates, when he realized something.

The earliest date given was Eyeth year 1, or as listed in the book, 2106. The dates stopped sometime at the end of the 2200s. This book was older than his grandparents. Why was it here?

Virgil showed the book to Shawn.

"That book was banned a very long time ago. If Clerkers knew that book was still here, they would assassinate me."

"Why is it here?"

"Records."

Records. That made sense. The Guardian had to know both good and bad things about humanity, like how a judge had to know both sides of the story being presented in his courtroom.

Virgil put the book back. "Did Clerkers call for the ban?"

"No. The Guardian called for it."

This book was first published in Eyeth year 101 and updated every five or ten years. After the Guardian decreed that Clerc had more than repaid its debts, the book was pulled out of print. Underground copies persisted, but most copies of this book were destroyed, leaving two known copies remaining. The ban was put in place to ensure that hatred of Clerc, while well-deserved, ceased.

A gust of a sigh escaped Virgil's lips. "People still don't like Clerc."

"History and time can destroy memories," Shawn signed. "If it happened before, it will happen again."

"What if it does happens again?"

"That's your job, our job." Shawn emphasized *your* and *our*.

Virgil nodded. He looked at the rows of history books on the shelves. So much he had to prevent. In less than a year, he would have all this on his shoulders, the burden he had to stop from happening again.

"The first Guardian was lucky," Virgil signed. "He had, what, zero years history?"

Shawn laughed. "Three hundred. Deaf civilization started at what time? The early nineteenth century, C. E., on Old Earth."

"They were fortunate long-ago. They lived with hearing people and didn't have to run everything."

Shawn gave Virgil a long, hard look that spoke of weariness.

Hadn't Shawn talked about Old Earth, a person named J something? "You're obviously not a Clerker... you finished-touched Old Earth before?"

"I left there when I was small."

"And they took away your friend's aids..." Virgil trailed off. That had always seemed odd to him. Why would they take away his aids if he used them? Shawn was a rare immigrant, one of the very few from Old Earth. Virgil didn't even know that place still had disabled people. That was stopped long before he was born. But causes of deafness were so numerous that one probably escaped through the system once in a while. "I'm lucky. My ears broke and I got full privilege. That wouldn't have happened to me there."

"I have a thought experiment for you. Sociologists recently studied Gallians, wondering why they didn't deafen themselves and gain full privileges on Eyeth."

Virgil snorted. "No way."

"Why?"

"Gallian culture is the opposite of Eyeth culture: they love sound. Many Gallian musicians are involved with percussion. Why give up all that pretty sound?" The expression for *pretty* dripped with scorn.

"Is it better to be a following sheep or a loyal wolf? Sheep are mindless, but wolves are independent."

"But that whole lone wolf thing is wrong!"

"In my metaphor, the sheep represent those who follow the herd and the wolves represent those who do their own thing."

Virgil scowled. Using an overused myth? Really?

Shawn went on, "The sociologists thought Gallians would deafen themselves to fit in."

"That's stupid. That's like Clerkers thinking they should make themselves hearing so they could fit in on Old Earth. If you changed to fit with everyone else, you still don't have their experiences."

"Exactly. Gallians explained that they were fine with who they were."

Virgil remembered something he learned with pride as a boy. "Clerc was great, but they couldn't conquer Gallaudet."

"Clerc was mighty yet struggling," Shawn signed, frowning. "Did you learn about the Great War?"

"A bit. Clerc and Milan started fighting over some stupid island, correct? That exploded into Clerc taking over the world. How'd that happen?"

"A young man's mistake," Shawn signed. "A young man who should have cared much more was then the Guardian, and he made a very serious error. This led to a battle, a great war and the start of an empire. Let me tell you this story…"

Chapter VII: Start of a War

Upon being crowned, the Guardian was hailed as an Eyeth hero, the Founder who would set a good example for the citizens of Eyeth. But he didn't have the mask to shield him yet. He fell into the temptations of parties. At those parties, the young Guardian learned how to hold his liquor, score at beer hoops and dance to vibrations. He initially excused those parties as a way to talk to people so he could decide what to do. But he was too drunk at those parties to remember any of his conversations. His party nights soon increased from once or twice a month to parties every weekend.

Every year, he hung out with an ever-changing core group of people. The year he was nineteen, his group included Dillon, a genius with machines and clothes; Russet, a red-haired cool dude; Magenta, a pink-haired punk; and Kylee, a shy quiet girl. One night, Russet was throwing a mad crazy party with laser lights everywhere and blackout drunk people everywhere. The Guardian asked to crash since he had an appointment the next day.

A week before, the Clerc president had asked the Guardian to come to a very important emergency meeting in Laurent. Since Russet lived very close to Laurent, the Guardian decided to go hang out with him. The party was a nice bonus.

The morning of the meeting, as his pager vibrated, he was still asleep, sprawled on Russet's spare mattress and drooling. He couldn't even remember what he did at the beginning of the night.

The pager's vibrations woke him up part of the way. Eyes half-closed, he swiveled up the screen. When he saw the flashing reminder, "Important Meeting – Grand Central,

10:00," his eyes snapped open. He still had Important Duties, and this was one of them. He jumped out of bed, wearing only his pants, chugged an energy shot, pulled on a clean shirt, his beloved cargo jacket and some shoes, and ran like he was on fire towards the maglev. If he wasn't there, his ass would be lit on fire anyway, or so they had told him.

He entered Grand Central at 10:13. At 10:19, the president of Clerc and a group of senators entered, laughing and talking. Good old Deaf Standard Time, out there to save the Guardian's sorry ass. By now, he'd gotten some coffee into his system, so the Guardian was perkier.

The people around him were typical suits, the government type. This meeting would be the same old boring shit, so the Guardian knew he could fake his way through it. It was easy: visually listen enough to get the gist, sign something that fit what they were discussing, smile and nod whenever needed.

They finished talking and laughing, and the president of Clerc, a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair and goatee, signed, "Look! The great Guardian!" Everyone clapped, waving their hands. The Guardian grinned sheepishly as they either slapped his back or ruffled his blond curls.

After sitting back down, they were back to business. The president swiped some things on a hologram display. A circular series of screens appeared in midair above the center of the oval conference room table. From where the Guardian was sitting, he could see the screen in front of him. The president stood on a platform so that all the others could see his signing.

The president let them read each slide before he signed. All of the people in the room had learned how to read the Ameslan alphabet, also known as Si5, in school. The president allowed the Guardian more time to finish reading since the Guardian hadn't learned it in school.

The agenda was covered first. The Guardian, despite the caffeine in his system, found himself nodding off. This was a boring meeting, but it was important and he had to get through it for his job. So he forced himself to stay awake.

Basic business was covered first. They discussed enforcing the use of Ameslan and other mundane topics while the Guardian almost fell asleep, having sight-heard this before. To be honest, he was glad that he was scheduled to go back to sleep next month. He was getting bored here.

Caterers brought in lunch. For once, the Guardian was glad he wore his cargo jacket. Making sure nobody was watching, he wrapped sandwiches in napkins and stuffed them into various pockets. He saved the liquid pocket for last.

Several months ago, Dillon had made this jacket for him. When his current group found out about the lavish food the politicians got, they begged the Guardian to sneak out some for them. They couldn't afford that kind of food and were jealous he got to eat better for free. Dillon made him the jacket to help out. It was covered with waterproofed pockets. With these, the Guardian had liberated a lot of food for his group. The latest thing Dillon added was a pouch to hold liquid on one inside part of the jacket, and they had practiced siphoning liquid into the pouch. It was tricky, but it could be done. Dillon warned the Guardian not to fill it too much or it could leak.

Now, as the Guardian slipped the hose into the bowl of sangria sitting on the table, he watched the others. They were talking about the latest hot issue, Bright Island. Apparently there was a recently-discovered island, that Clerkers called Bright because its shape resembled the sign for *bright*. It was located near both Clerc's and Milan's coasts, and both countries were fighting over it. The arguments were stupid. More land! Who cared about that? The population density of Eyeth was low and they had plenty of space. They didn't need to worry about grabbing more land.

He sucked on the hose to start the siphon process, then guided the other end into the opened zipper on his jacket that led to the pouch, located near the bottom of his jacket. As the liquid burbled into his jacket, the Guardian kept a hand on the hose and pouch while he watched the discussion, bored.

One politician was arguing that Clerc had more deaf babies than Milan did, so they needed more resources. Another said that he sight-heard that scientists were working on a "Deaf option" to make sure there were more deaf babies born on Eyeth.

The Guardian's eyes glazed over. He had talked with one of those scientists when he was thirteen at some pre-Eyeth party. Years and years later, they were still working on it?

A huge argument erupted between the politicians over this so-called "Option". Those who argued that deaf people should naturally come into the world were outnumbered by those who argued for the sanctity of Deaf civilization.

The president of Clerc steered the conversation back onto track. He argued that Clerc had the rights to Bright Island, since it was closer to them. Arguments flared up

again over this issue, but most people were arguing that the proximity, not the discoverer, gave them the right to the island.

The Guardian was growing tired of this stupid arguing. He finished siphoning by cutting off the hose in the bowl and then put the hose away. He remembered a cartoon where two characters fought and saw who was the best and most deserved to get the object they wanted.

He stood up and held up his hands for attention. When everyone was looking at him, the Guardian signed, "I have a great idea!"

Everyone looked interested now. Some sat up straighter.

"The countries involved here are, what, Milan and Clerc? Correct?"

The president signed, "Yes."

"And those countries, Milan and Clerc, they both want more. Why? So they can be the best!"

A lot of people nodded in vague agreement. Yes, expanding your resources did make you a better country. In a way, the Guardian was correct. One senator signed, "Why are you assuming we want to be the best? We want Bright so we can expand our resources. That doesn't match being competitive."

The Guardian signed, "But having more gets you ahead!"

The senator blinked, then his face fell. "I suppose so..."

"Great! So they want to see who's the best. Clerc should prove we're the best!"

The president of Clerc loved this idea. "We've been trying to prove for many years that true Deaf people are better than other, inferior, deaf people. We helped start Deaf civilization. We should prove that we are the best by taking Bright Island."

Most of the other senators signed, "Yes!" in agreement, but a few were upset with the Guardian. One gave the Guardian the evil eye on his way out, but the Guardian shrugged it off. Most people loved him.

The Guardian made sure that all of the pockets in his jacket were filled with delicious food and that the pouch was closed up tight. Then he left the government building and made his way back to Russet's.

His core friends were waiting outside on the porch when he showed up with the food.

After going inside, Kylee and Magenta helped take the Guardian's jacket off, then hung it on a chair, careful to not spill anything, and unpacked all the food.

Dillon smacked the Guardian on the back. "Awesome! You got lots! How did the hose work out?"

"Great!" The Guardian gave him two thumbs up. "I got us some champion wine juice." He explained sangria to those who were confused.

Russet signed, "I can add vodka and we can have a nice dinner party. But we're kicking-out people first."

The boys went through the house and kicked out the last of the stragglers. When they came back, Kylee and Magenta were setting up for dinner.

Over dinner, Dillon and the Guardian discussed future plans to sneak out more food. "You need a trenchcoat," Dillon signed.

"I'm leaving in a month... worth it?" the Guardian signed. He had told them that he was living here for one year then leaving for several years. It was the easiest way to explain his job to them.

Dillon grinned. "Worth the practice. We can keep the coats to remember you. How'd that boring meeting go?"

"I told them to be the very best like nobody ever was," the Guardian signed. Everyone laughed.

That night, they had fun laughing and talking . The Guardian never once thought about what he was supposed to do. He was having fun with his friends, so why should it occur to him that he happened to be in charge of the whole world? The Guardian enjoyed his life, traveling and chatting with various people.

The next day, the president of Clerc called him. "I need to discuss something in private," he signed over videophone on the pager. The Guardian boarded the maglev and went straight to the government building, hurrying to the president's office.

The president looked grave, his hands folded under his chin. He signed, "Milan won't listen. We talked with them, but they wouldn't give us what we wanted."

The Guardian solemnly nodded. Then he signed, "If they won't listen to signing force, then give them physical force!"

"Excellent suggestion!"

He enjoyed his last month before his year was to end. He partied and enjoyed his friends and life to the very fullest.

At the end of his year, he returned to Zonia to disconnect.

The next time the Guardian re-connected to Eyeth, he was taken to the Classrooms for his catch-up. A year after he told the president to take physical action, Clerc had invaded Milan. Clerc won many battles and gained control of Milan. It was strange to sight-listen to accounts of Lanner children learning to sign and having manual education instead of the country's traditional oral education.

The Guardian shrugged. Cool! The awesome Clerkers had those stupid Lanners under their control. He consulted a map and saw that Bright Island was now the property of Clerc. It was now marketed as a tourist destination.

Now twenty, he set out for his fourth year on the job like nothing had happened.

Chapter VIII: Reflections, III

At the mention of the Guardian being hung over at the meeting, Virgil shook his head. "What an idiot," he signed. "Why is he getting drunk and partying the night before an important meeting? Shouldn't he know any better? Where's his helmet to hide him?"

"He doesn't have his helmet yet."

The Guardian was greeted as one of the First Founders. Virgil raised his eyebrows in skepticism. "When does this story happen? Right before the war?"

Shawn didn't answer.

Virgil found it weird that a nineteen-year-old guy could be greeted that way. This was thirty years into Eyeth's history and the founder should have been in his forties or fifties, not still be a teenager. Something smelled funky, but Virgil wasn't going to question it yet. Maybe this was part of the weirdness of being the Guardian. The Guardian struggled to stay awake during the boring meeting. "Dude, why the hell are you complaining?" Virgil signed. "You got an awesome job! I'd kill to be able to sit in on more government meetings."

Shawn laughed a little. "You will sit through many government meetings when you're the Guardian."

Sneaking out food happened during the meeting. "Why is he thinking about sneaking out food?" Virgil's hands exploded in sign. "He has better things to be doing! He should be paying attention to the meeting, not the damn food!"

"He was also a nineteen-year-old boy."

"I wasn't that bad when I was nineteen," Virgil countered.

The Guardian mentioned wanting to be the best just like the characters in the old cartoon. Virgil stood up and signed, his hands moving faster and more outward, "Damn it! I wish I could tell that Guardian: Life. Is. NOT. A. CARTOON!" He screamed the last words in Gallian English.

The president and the Guardian talked about making contributions to Deaf civilization, another thing Virgil didn't understand. "Why are they so obsessed with Deaf civilization?" he signed. Why was a childish idiot running the world?

Shawn signed, "One of the big ideas discussed on Ray was that Deaf people could establish their own civilization. Some people argued that Deaf people had been civilized ever since deaf education was established."

The Guardian quoted a line from a cartoon to make his friends laugh, making Virgil grit his teeth. "Once again, life is not a damn cartoon. Does this guy grow up?"

"Yes. It takes a while."

Milan wouldn't bow to Clerc's demands. "Obviously. Shouldn't the Clerker government have negotiated first?"

"The biggest problem with Clerc, what, that it took pride in its superiority complex."

The world went to war. Virgil shook his head, scowling. "They didn't discuss it like mature adults and all these bad things happened."

"Yes. But it also helped to shape our planet as we know it."

Bright Island was mentioned as a bustling tourist destination. Virgil signed. "It's empty now. What was there long ago?"

"They set up a campsite there as well as an amusement park. But after some issues with the amusement park, they razed everything."

After Shawn finished his story, Virgil jumped up and screamed, "How could they let that happen?! He was just a dumb nineteen-year-old kid—why on Eyeth couldn't they see that? Why didn't they get someone older?" He glared at Shawn, panting.

Shawn bowed his head for a moment. "When Eyeth was first established, they wanted to give the Guardian job to Zen Daniels. He would have been age twenty-five if he started, but he turned it down. He wanted to live out his life in peace, retreating from Eyeth's affairs very early on. So they chose his mentee, whom Zen Daniels personally recommended"

"What was the mentee's name?" Virgil was horrified yet fascinated.

"When this boy started, he was very young, too young for his job."

Virgil scowled. "Why couldn't they persuade Zen Daniels to take the job?" He thought about the people he met while traveling. "I've talked to both Clerkers and Lanners with ancestors in the Great War. They talked about how they still hate the other because the other's ancestor hurt theirs over a hundred years ago." He shook his head, lips still twisted into a thin line. "How can one stupid boy's actions change the world so much?"

Shawn looked very unhappy. He signed, slowly, "They should have persuaded Zen Daniels, yes. Eyeth suffered."

Virgil looked at Shawn, analyzing his teacher's emotions. Was he unhappy about his predecessor? Or was he angry about that kid making the job harder for later Guardians? "Do you get why that kid did what he did?"

Shawn nodded. "I sympathize. As a very young man, I had too much fun. I paid for all the fun I had in my youth. Were you ever foolish?"

Virgil rolled his eyes. "I'm not a party person. I just like traveling and flirting with girls. Pretty ones are my favorite." His wolf's grin returned for a moment before disappearing. "How did you pay for your fun later?"

"I drank too much and I slept with a lot of girls. It's not that important for you to know."

"Really? You charmed a girl into your bed?" Virgil didn't get how his reticent mentor could be attractive to girls, even as a young man. Girls liked the ones who could charm the pants off them, not the ones who sulked alone in the corner with a pitcher of beer.

"That isn't the point. The point is—"

"No, I want to know! You have my file. You know a lot about me, that I have a little sister, that I've gotten in trouble with the law, other things. But I only know that you're the current Guardian, nothing else." Virgil ground his fist into his forehead, his eyes closed with thought. Then his shining blue eyes opened wide. "Wait! What happened to your sisters? Did they come with you?"

Shawn glared at his apprentice. Then he let out a gust of a sigh. "I suppose you have a right to know. When I was young, I loved, still love history. My sisters died when I

was little. Sometimes I wish J--- came much earlier. All three of us could have been saved."

What happened? Did he have to watch his sisters die? Why didn't he want to talk a lot about himself? Virgil noticed that archaic namesign popping up again, the J flicking off the temple. Who was that?

Shawn changed the subject. "After the Guardian returned, he discovered that Clerc invaded Milan. They already took Bright Island several years before, but they wanted more."

Virgil ran a hand through his dark curls while rolling his eyes, dark with annoyance. "Of course those freaking Clerkers wanted more."

"After they took over Bright, Clerc planned for years. They wanted to make Milan like them, more superior and not so inferior."

"Superior and inferior," Virgil mocked, imitating Shawn's old-fashioned, complex and slow style of signing. "And I got the impression Lanners didn't like that."

"Correct. They banned sign language for many years. Fifty years ago, it was advised they should drop their ban. Milan still hasn't approved that DECISION." The sign for "decision" had that fancy flair Shawn had used once before. Wow, Milan was so angry about Clerc's attempt at transforming them that they turned down the world judge's direct order.

Virgil signed so, and Shawn nodded. "It will take them some time to recover. They've made significant progress since the Clerc occupation."

In their isolation from most of the world and their opening up to other planets, they came up with some great technology that helped Eyeth catch up after its Technological Delay. But Milan still had problems. "Both Clerc and Milan are messed up. What happened with Clerc's plans?"

"Did you read about Islaygate?"

Islaygate, Islaygate... where had he seen that name before? Once, in his wanderings through rural Clerc as a teenager, he stumbled upon a sign, hovering mid-air at eye level, near a field, with its projector embedded in the ground. It was weird and anachronistic, like seeing a space shuttle taking off from near a barn.

Woods bordered the field on both sides. They stretched as far as his eye could see, joining in the very far distance. At one end of the field, he could see some scattered buildings.

The sign had Si5 letters on it, but Virgil wasn't too great with reading it, even though he signed it fluently. He poked the laser display sign and the letters assembled themselves into an English translation. He read: "Location of Islaygate, Home of First Win of Great War. Year 2144, Eyeth Year 39. James Butcher Memorial Up Ahead." This place was celebrating something that happened over three hundred years ago.

Virgil, then age seventeen and curious, headed into the field. He had seen the word Islaygate when he read about the Great War while studying for diploma exams. But he couldn't remember Islaygate that well.

He passed several signs, all displaying Gallian English now. Some were memorials to dead soldiers from prominent Clerker families. Virgil remembered their descendants with a distinct lack of fondness. Other signs talked about different events in the battle.

One sign claimed a particular spot was where the great war hero James Butcher, then a lowly private first class, obtained the enemy's plans. These plans helped his army's commanders design a new plan of counter-attack. It won the battle and the war on the Milan front. For this ultimate victory, James Butcher received Clerc's first Medal of Honor.

As Virgil wandered around, he noticed James Butcher's name coming up a lot. An elaborate memorial statue for him was mounted on a platform so tall the short boy stepped back some distance to take a good look. Virgil slowly circled around, looking at the statue. The ears were typical of Clerker sculptures: solid half-discs attached to a realistic face.

It looked too fancy by global standards and fine by Clerker standards. The man, short-haired and wearing an ancient military uniform, stood at attention. He was painted in gaudy colors, with his coat of paint looking new. A plaque said that this was James Butcher. It also said that in the years after the battle, he had ascended to the rank of major general and was an esteemed Army officer and Clerker citizen.

Funny, how much they looked up to him. Today, there were a few flowers scattered around the memorial with nothing on the other graves and memorials. That was impressive for a guy who lived three hundred years ago.

As a teenager, Virgil decided that this guy must have been a champion Deaf citizen with full privileges. He had to be, to get all this praise for winning tons of medals and helping win some stupid war.

Virgil signed to Shawn, "I know Islaygate, yes. I once visited."

"Islaygate was the first major battle in the Great War," Shawn signed. "Before Islaygate, there was the invasion."

For a year after the Guardian left, the president of Clerc worked with his top military officers to orchestrate a plan for Milan.

They decided to have soldiers march to Milan's capital, Clarke, and take the Lanner president and his government officials hostage.

As the digi-papers would report it, a group of Clerker soldiers, once assembled, marched across the Clerc border and into Milan, towards Clarke. Scarcely twenty miles into their march, they entered a rural city full of Milanners willing to defend their own country. The soldiers crowded into a few tanks, and with a few snipers on top, they rolled through the town, leaving as few wounded as possible. But one of the locals contacted a friend who lived in Clarke. When the Clerc tanks rolled into Clarke, a much larger group of Milanner soldiers awaited them. They fought briefly, but it ended with Milan taking the Clerker soldiers as political prisoners.

The Clerc president was stumped on what to do, his sole and best plan gone. He talked with his advisors and then talked to some top people from his military. This group of top people, which included some generals plus a tactician, was given the task of figuring out how to take over Milan. After much undercover consulting of Old Earth's

military history, they presented their best plan plus several back-ups to the Clerc president, telling him that they came up with it themselves. If he knew they had been borrowing tactics from hearing people, they would be dishonorably discharged. After PFC James Butcher gave them some valuable information, they were able to come up with a successful plan.

Chapter IX: The Great Traitor

In the earliest days of Eyeth, people created terms to differentiate between deaf and hearing people. Deaf people were called Silents. This beautiful term soon faded out of use. Hearing people were called mouthflappers, which looked much better in sign than speech.

Along with telling apart deaf and hearing people, they had other difficulties. Before the Deaf Option became widespread, some people in Clerc gave birth to hearing infants. They would arrange trades with people from Gallaudet with deaf infants, and the babies would be switched and raised in the countries they fit in with.

Some Clerkers didn't want to give up their hearing babies at all, so they would force their children to be like them by putting ear plugs into their ears. Those hearing misfits in a Deaf world labeled themselves "false Silents." They secretly took out their ear plugs to listen to nature but in the city, they kept their plugs in to avoid the cacophony of the Deaf world.

James Butcher was one such false Silents. He was quiet with sandy hair and a slight stature. As a boy, he became fast best friends with fellow false Silents: Janine, Gina, Paul, Eric and Mark. Their mothers became used to a group of children running through the house causing a ruckus. The false Silent children camped in nature and discovered more sound. At one point, Gina met a visiting Gallian who taught them all how to speak his language. The children spoke this language in private and signed in public.

As teenagers, they discovered the joy of music. James loved playing the guitar, as did Eric. Janine loved the violin and experimented with making an electric violin sound as

loud as Mark's drums. Her violin's goosebump-raising screech was reproduced on many a Halloween. James, Janine, Gina on the sax and Paul on lyrics made a decent garage band, which they called Naked Barbie Aquarium. Eric played back-up guitar if needed, and Mark gave them good vibrations for Deaf venues.

The night of their high school graduation, they talked about their futures. Mark and Gina were thinking about college. James, Eric and Paul were thinking about joining the army. Janine said that would be good since they could serve their country.

Mark said they should go to college and Paul said that was boring. The army would be more exciting with the war going on. Clerc had invaded Milan three months earlier, demanding Bright Island. All the newspapers talked about the controversy over Milan taking Clerker soldiers as political prisoners.

Then Janine signed, "The hell... let's go to the army office tomorrow and sign up!"

Mark and Gina declined, but the others agreed with much enthusiasm. They spent the rest of the night drinking beers stolen from Eric's father's fridge and talking. A spontaneous jam session was sparked in the wee hours of the morning.

In the morning, James, Eric, Paul and Janine rode in her sports car down to the army office.

Janine, the perpetual leader, marched up to the bored officer sitting there and signed, "We all want to join!"

The officer, flustered, got them through the paperwork then sent them, one by one, for the physical. During the physical, the doctor checked each of them over. Each of the four held their breath out of fear, a childhood habit, during the ear inspection. They

didn't need an audiological exam. In Clerc, once a five-year-old had their audiological exam and was cleared, that child was exempt from further audiological exams.

They were all cleared to join the Clerker army and given a paper which was shoved into pockets without a glance. Janine bounced with excitement the whole way back to her car. "I hope I get to fight in Milan!" she signed, squealing in her excitement.

Eric plugged two fingers into his ears. "Damn it, Janine," he signed after pulling his fingers out. "Keep your noise down."

Janine let out a high-pitched screech which made everyone else clap their hands to the side of their heads. Groans of "Damn it, Janine!" commenced.

James grinned and pulled his hands away. "I thought you all knew how she is."

Paul pushed his glasses up his nose and signed, "When will we find out when we leave?" Of the group, he had the most trouble with understanding sign since he came to Clerc much later than the others.

He got weird looks from the others. Janine signed, "Didn't they give you a paper?"

Paul, panicked, searched through his pockets while the others suppressed giggles. He had always been the forgetful one.

James laughed, looking down. Silly Paul, always forgetting things! Then he flinched when he remembered last week and sitting in a high school classroom, taking finals. Now he had signed up to join the army with his friends and they were bound for a world of adventure. It was strange how things could change so fast.

The Clerc-blend hollowed concrete sidewalk vibrated with Paul's attention-grabbing stomps. James looked up. Eric and Janine were looking over Paul's shoulder at the paper. Eric's hands were murmuring about when they would be shipped out.

James was about to look then he remembered his own, pulling it out. It was a letter of welcome from the general, telling him that his military service would be "much appreciated". The letter went on to inform him that he would receive a letter informing him when he would ship out.

Paul's letter said the same thing, as did Janine's and Eric's. Janine pouted. "I hoped we could leave soon."

"When did you want to leave?" Paul asked.

"Tomorrow?" James teased.

All four laughed as they got into Janine's car and went home.

While Mark and Gina worked on summer preparations for college, the other four discussed what they could be doing.

Paul and Eric both wanted to go into strategy, but Janine and James both wanted to go into combat. Eric protested that they could die if they went to the front lines, but Janine said that was half the fun of war. Then she sparked a quick game of battle by screaming, "BATTLE!"

Battle, from their childhood days, was more fun to play with many others. In elementary school, the six of them once met a group of fellow false Silents who taught them how to play battle. With thirty kids running around, the game quickly turned into a cacophonous, muddy mess.

The premise was simple: players divided into two armies and everyone picked up a stick. Then everyone hid and shot at each other by aiming their sticks and screaming, "BANG!" The player who got hit had to lie down and pretend to be dead.

During an impromptu session in Eric's parents' backyards not long after discovering the game, Eric's mother, noticing how they screamed and made sounds, cautioned them not to show this game to deaf children. She was fearful they would be found out and taken away. The group of seven-year-olds agreed, scared of being separated from their families. The warning was seared into their brains.

Now, James mentioned Eric's mother's warning while he and Janine were hunting down sticks. He signed, "After we enter, what if they figure out we can hear?"

Janine paused mid-step, her foot comically suspended mid-air. One side of her mouth twisted. She looked at James, and her foot dropped to the ground. Her hand shook so much James thought she was going to drop her stick. Then she collapsed onto James, grabbing his arms so tightly she left marks. James held her, not sure what to do.

Then Janine let go. "I don't want to get caught. I don't want to lose my country."

"We won't," James assured her. "We'll be the best. We'll show them it won't matter if you're a false or true Silent. All it matters, what, you love your country so much you're willing to do anything."

Janine's smile lasted a split second before she punched James in the shoulder. "That was so cheesy!"

James laughed. "It got you to smile, didn't it?"

She looked away. "Yeah…"

Then the battle was on with the strategists fighting the combatants. The combatants won, but the game wasn't as fun with four people.

They helped each other walk home. Being furthest away, Janine and James were last. When they arrived at Janine's, she asked him, "Can you stay with me? I want to hang out."

James understood what she meant. The two of them hung out that night, drank and discussed a lot of things. The biggest thing on Janine's mind was getting caught.

"Ever since I was little," she told James. "my parents always told me to be careful to never tell anyone. Remember our first meeting? I was so scared!"

James laughed, remembering. One day when he was four, he and his mother were at the playground. James hadn't needed ear plugs back then, so his ears were freer to hear. That day, he heard a high-pitched noise and ran towards it. His mother ran after him, signing to be careful, but little James didn't see.

The sound was a little girl standing on top of a hill, screaming her lungs out. James waved his arms and screamed, "Hey!" It was one of the few things he had learned from his Englander father.

The little girl froze, cutting out mid-scream. She looked around, terrified. Then she signed while making odd noises, "What? You taking away me?"

"No. Why you screaming?"

The girl tilted her head at him. "Fun!" Then she threw her head back to scream again.

James tried screaming too, but he felt so funny that he stopped. When he walked back, she followed him. They played together. After meeting, James' mother and the girl's mother realized that both of their children were false Silents. They made arrangements for playdates that day. From then on, James and Janine were good friends. The other four came along, one by one.

In the present, James nodded. "We'll keep each other safe."

She hugged him tightly. As he hugged her, James wondered what would happen. Would they succeed? Or would they fail, be caught as traitors to their home country?

One month later, the four of them were shipped out. It was located in a secret location somewhere on the border of Clerc, so secret that the bus windows were blacked out. A near-impassable partition was between the passengers and the driver.

With the halo lights flickering above, Eric, Paul, Janine and James talked about what they'd do. Janine was confident she'd be the best, naturally.

They were escorted off the bus, into sorted lines going to their respective barracks, and the fun began.

For the next several weeks, the new soldiers were whipped into shape fast. At first, the four false Silents feared that any second, an officer could burst into their barracks and arrest them. But as everyone got into shape, they realized that they were accepted. Everyone else didn't think about hearing. They grew up in a society where everyone was deaf. Why suspect?

Since all four decided to do away with their ear plugs, they were aware of their hearing. To them, sound was essential in war. It was like battle, but instead of thirty kids

it was fifty soldiers playing army. During basic training, their boots squished through mud while running through the obstacle courses after a hard rain. Sticks cracked underfoot. Soldiers grunted during exercise. Birds chirped in the early morning. Eric admitted to keeping his plugs to help him sleep longer. James tolerated it.

If all four happened to be together, one would start humming the first bars to a Naked Barbie Aquarium song and the others would join in. After finishing, they would smile, reveling in their shared secret.

Their happiness was short-lived. After boot camp was finished, they received their assignments. Eric and Paul, recognized for their leadership and field skills, would go into Tactics. Janine and James would go into Combat.

They said their goodbyes to each other on their last night together. After tonight, they would only get to see each other on leave. Eric signed, "I'll miss seeing you around, James."

James half-smiled. "You'll have fun hanging out in Strategy. Plenty of smart guys there like you."

"You'll have fun in Combat. Plenty of dumb guys there like you."

They laughed and bumped fists. Then Eric signed, "I miss you."

Janine signed, "Everyone misses each other!" She made fawning, mocking doe-eyed faces.

They laughed it off. The four of them exchanged addresses and promised to write to each other and to Mark and Gina too. Paul signed that he'd ask those two to tell the others of a death in battle.

After that night, James wouldn't see Eric for ten years, Paul for eternity.

The sergeants noticed James and Janine's great teamwork in boot camp and recommended them together for partnered assignments.

"Army encouraging our marriage?" James signed after he received his next assignment, a year after they last saw Eric and Paul. It was identical to Janine's.

"God, hope not," Janine signed. "Terrible!"

Assigned to Platoon #19, they went to some town named Islaygate. Details were to be withheld until arrival.

"Where Islaygate?" James asked.

"Near border with Milan." Janine pursed her lips. "You think another invasion?"

James shook his head. The army had invaded Milan several times over the last two years with negative results. Now Milan was in lockdown, making it harder. "I don't understand why our country keeps invading."

"Don't question! Serve!" Janine signed. They shared a smile: that was the slogan she invented to describe their time in the army.

"Why? Nobody suspects," James signed, his routine answer.

Within two hours of packing, they were riding in a truck to Islaygate.

It was a nice but humid and hot summer day. At midday, James pulled off his T-shirt and Janine stuck out her tongue at him, signing, "No fair!" James stuck his tongue out back at her.

Three hours later, they were dragging their bags to their new barracks.

The sergeant greeted them with a military salute. "Hello, Private First Class Butcher. Hello, Private Shields."

Janine and James saluted back. "Hello, Sergeant Marshall."

Marshall explained the basic duties. It was a small base, with thirty total personnel. They would eventually bring in more soldiers for a mission, totaling up to two hundred. "You two expert with seeking, yes?"

Reconnaissance was the English translation for the Ameslan sign Marshall used. *Seeking* was the literal translation, but it included a more concentrated expression and a specific direction for the sign to move in that differentiated it from the regular Ameslan sign *seeking*.

Janine signed, "Sir, yes, sir! We good with seeking, sir!"

"Good." Janine and James, after a round of training, would be assigned to shifts in the woods along with a third soldier in their platoon. Their job was to patrol the woods while watching for Milan information.

James signed, "Mission to invade Milan?"

"The mission is secret."

Janine gave James a knowing look. It definitely was.

The next few months were boring. Janine and James walked through the woods, watching for the enemy. James practiced his silent walking skills, not stepping on a single twig or disturbing a single crackling leaf.

Two months before Islaygate's mission, James noticed something odd. For the first few months he was here, he was the only human in the woods. But now he noticed odd noises, ones that seemed human.

There were sticks that snapped, broken by something heavier than an animal. James thought it was a deer. Judging by how close he was, he should have seen that deer by now.

Then he started hearing voices. He first dismissed the voices as birdsong, but the voices were too irregular. He listened closer, recognizing it as English. It was severely distorted from the English he knew: all screeching simple sounds and nothing that sounded like a CH, a Z or a J.

Over the next few weeks, James listened to those voices and realized that those voices were from Milan. They spoke English with a thick Lanner accent, and James learned how to decipher it.

Two weeks before the invasion, he heard the voices again on patrol. He froze and pricked up his ears.

One soldier said, "This place's Clerc?" Another replied in the affirmative. The soldier laughed, a harsh bark, and said, "Clerc's ugly!" James, remembering the beautiful hills and woods of his childhood, wanted to differ.

Then another soldier, the one James identified as the leader, said, "Quiet! They're almost done bringin' everyone in. We had our spy recon. They have another try in a few weeks."

James' breath caught in his throat.

"Those idiots!" a third soldier said. "Can't those mutes give up?"

"Use the blockin' sequence again."

Blocking sequence? What was that?

"How many rows?" a fourth asked.

"Eight. With suppor' on the sides."

The others protested.

The leader said, "They caught on to our ole strategy. We need to keep outsmartin' 'em, make 'em give up."

The other soldiers agreed, not sounding happy.

The leader went on to talk about what their spy found. Apparently he was disguised as one of the Clerker soldiers in Islaygate.

James wondered if it was a fellow false Silent like himself, or a Lanner soldier who knew enough Ameslan to pass.

The guy was a Lance Corporal. He had basic duties and looked like any other soldier.

From what they said, the guy was on one of the household duties around the base. James needed to ask the sergeant if he could check the roster and narrow it down.

The group of Lanner soldiers left and James relaxed. A stream ran down his leg and he realized that he had been scared shitless. What if those soldiers had caught him? James was so used to talking around other talkers that he could have started babbling too. They could have used him to their advantage.

Walking back, he thought about what he overheard. They were talking about the invasion—a supposedly secret plan. But Marshall had told them about it in a roundabout way on their first day here, so it wasn't that hard to figure out. They needed to stop being so transparent.

Those soldiers talked about their plan to thwart a secret invasion. Wow, they would be surprised if the Clerc Army out-thwarted them! James knew what he had to do.

After his shift was over, he went to Sergeant Marshall's office and asked to see him in private. Marshall agreed to meet him that night.

James was summoned from his barracks at one hundred hours to the Games Room door. He went there, confused. Why would there be secret meetings in the Games Room, where the board games and other equipment were kept to entertain bored soldiers?

He signed so when he saw Marshall.

"Less suspicion."

They went inside. With a gold passcard, Marshall opened a door that James had assumed was an electrical room.

Inside was a simple card table surrounded by several metal folding chairs. The two of them sat down and Marshall signed, "What's-up? Why privacy?"

"Sir, when I was seeking today, I saw a group of soldiers talking, moving their mouths." That was a giveaway for Lanners. "They were discussing plans, sir. I moved closer, saw what they were saying, sir." When James initially entered for seeking duty, he listed lip-reading as one of his skills. He had told the officer in charge that he could figure

out what Lanners were saying. The officer had tested him with some words, and then James was accepted into seeking.

"They speak English?"

"Yes, sir."

"What they say?"

"They said they have a mole here."

Marshall's eyes narrowed.

"That's how they knew about our invasions before, sir. Their spy, he knew. They also discussed their plan, sir. Something about a blocking sequence." James fingerspelled the words since he wasn't sure how to translate it.

"Tactics." Marshall's eyes lit up. "No more for now, Private First Class! This matter must be taken to the general! Go get dressed and meet me back at the Executive Room."

At past one in the morning, James found himself sitting in an office, rubbing sleep from his eyes, wearing formal dress and discussing strategy with his sergeant, several other military officers and General Wells himself. James felt shy since everyone else in the room was much older than he was, yet they were treating him like a peer.

James told them about the Lanners' new strategy. He signed, "They were talking about this thing called, what, a B-L-O-K-I-N S-E-Q-U-E-N."

"Do you mean B-L-O-C-K-I-N-G, blocking?" a major asked.

"I'm not sure how to spell that. They discussed, what, rows. They need more rows than we do to defeat us."

"Maybe they were talking about a blocking sequence," Marshall signed. "That strategy uses rows of moving soldiers."

"We need a new strategy," the general signed. "This plan is to be kept secret! You understand?"

They understood and delayed the battle for two weeks while they worked on their new plan.

"That won't make those Milan soldiers happy," a colonel signed.

The general shrugged it off. He and several other officers would work with a strategy team stationed nearby.

James signed, "Will I help, sir?"

Marshall signed, "You don't have any field experience."

The general told James that he would get a promotion and then he was dismissed, escorted by Marshall.

In Marshall's office, the sergeant pulled up the rosters for basic duties on his screen. He tapped the box above the ranks twice, sorting them from lowest to highest ranks. With a sweep, he selected all of the lance corporals. Marshall told James, "Your assignment today, what? See if you can find our spy."

James was allowed to sit in the sergeant's office and go through the rosters. He knew a few things that narrowed down this list. He was a lance corporal who had been there a year. He worked in the kitchen, the source of the base's rumor mill.

He studied the list, looking for any abnormalities. Nothing odd. They all arrived at the usual dates and were promoted at the usual times. They all seemed like the typical

Clerker soldier. Out of curiosity, James expanded the set of categories shown from the basic essentials to the full range.

There was one column, labeled Infirmary Visits, which puzzled James. He selected the column to expand to the full statistics. The spreadsheet popped up in a new window, with the full set of Infirmary columns and the group of six soldiers. Different ranges of time showed up, ranging from one week to three years.

One in particular had the most visits in three years compared to the rest. This was very interesting. He went back to the original window and selected the very interesting soldier's name, Andrew Miller, and the column labeled Infirmary Visits, then he clicked on File Notes.

A document popped up, showing notes as they pertained to Andrew Miller's infirmary visits. Apparently he got very ill at times only to recover in a very short time. The first time he went through one of those illnesses, he almost approached the army's limit before his quick recovery. How strange. This problem didn't occur on subsequent visits.

Perhaps a very ill soldier had bargained with a Milan soldier to take his place while he recovered. But why do that? Was he desperate enough, in this time of war, to keep his position and glory? Or was there something else going on?

James notified Marshal of his findings. Andrew Miller was investigated and then put on trial on suspicion of being a spy. Meanwhile, James fought in the Battle of Islaygate alongside Janine, one week after they were drilled on the new strategy, two weeks after the strategy was revised. When it was put into action, it totally surprised the Milan Army.

Clerc defeated Milan in the Battle of Islaygate, one of many to come. But that first battle would be remembered as the one that paved the path to the great Empire. It gave Clerc's army great confidence in their abilities, and many things that were learned, especially from the new recon units, were applied to future battles.

As an officer, James would watch carefully for those he suspected to be fellow false Silents and nominate them for recon. They had great observational skills. If their ears hadn't been destroyed, they also made for great spies against speaking countries like Milan and Q. He made this decision based on his own success in his first and most memorable battle. Because of this success and the reputation he had based on it, James had been allowed to surpass the limitation on enlisted soldiers becoming officers. But that would all be many years away.

After Milan surrendered at Islaygate, people cheered, clapping James on the back. James celebrated along with them, enjoying his glory. But he wasn't finished yet. As Andrew Miller's revealer, James was invited to the trial as a witness.

In the Laurent military court, LCpl Miller stood trial in the courtroom as they interrogated him. When James saw Miller, he had to wonder to himself, *This is the man I saw as a spy?* Miller would have looked like any other soldier in the Clerker Army if he wasn't stripped of his uniform. In his black and gray Clerc prisoner clothes, Miller looked like a prisoner. His clothes made who he was.

Except his clothes didn't truly define him. James watched Miller's testimony. His name was really Jake Miller, he signed, revealing himself with his clumsy signing skills to be a Milanner. Andrew Miller was his half-brother. The brothers were the sons of an

Englander father who left Jake's mother and moved to Milan, fathering Andrew there. The brothers got in touch not long before the war broke out. Jake wanted to join the Milan Army, but he was disqualified due to his poor speaking and comprehension skills. Andrew, already a Clerker soldier, promised Jake a place. They both looked like their father, so they gambled on being able to switch places.

People were signing about how those brothers shouldn't have contacted each other, let alone opened up a gateway for this dirty traitor. But James felt himself sympathizing. They had an Englander father who left them when they were young, like James. As an only child, he also wished for a brother.

Jake Miller had grown up in Milan, true, and despite his poor communication skills, he had plenty of friends. One friend, upon learning about Andrew, told him that he knew of a man who was offering good money for insider Clerc information. Jake, desperate for money since he couldn't get a job, talked to this man.

The man met with him, and later Andrew, to arrange the information. Andrew was vehemently against it at first, offering Jake part of his pay to make up for what the man offered. Jake told his brother it didn't matter because the man could pay more than Andrew. Besides, Jake was in deep debt to his friends and he wanted to feel useful to the country that rejected him on the basis of his poor communication skills, like a kicked puppy that kept crawling back to its master out of love. Reluctantly, Andrew agreed to it.

James felt bad for Jake Miller, but he also didn't understand. If Jake Miller was so frustrated with Milan, why didn't he move somewhere else? There should be a country

that would accept him. But if he was deep in debt, then it would be difficult for him to scrape up enough money to leave.

James spoke on the witness stand about how he figured out which soldier was the mole at Islaygate. As he signed, he couldn't help darting guilty looks at Jake Miller. Both he and Jake Miller were guilty of the same crime: pretending to be someone they weren't. Jake was arrested for it, yet James was applauded.

The judge ruled that both Andrew and Jake Miller were guilty of treason. Andrew had the additional charge of AWOL and Jake the additional charge of criminal impersonation. A month after the trial, James was awarded his new rank of Lance Corporal and Clerc's first Medal of Honor. When they gave him the bright yellow triangle for an LCpl and took away the bright yellow chevron of a PFC, he wanted to throw up, remembering the false Lance Corporal's life he had destroyed. But he kept a brave face on.

He would continue to the officer ranks, never forgetting Jake Miller. James was only able to relax about his false Silent status when he reached Master Sergeant, high up enough to avoid suspicion. Even then, he hid his Milan sympathy from fellow Clerkers.

At the point where Shawn revealed that James Butcher was hearing, Virgil yelled, speaking and signing at the same time, "No way! Impossible!"

Shawn quietly smiled. "Nothing is impossible. Sight-listen to how a hearing boy helped his Deaf country."

Virgil listened for the rest of the story, gray-blue eyes wide.

After finishing, Shawn told Virgil, "During James' time in the army, he was promoted up to the rank of Brigadier General. He was a great soldier, proving himself expert with warfare and reconnaissance. During his lifetime, he was a respected officer and a beloved citizen. Clerkers assumed he was born deaf. But James still carried the burden of hearing. He couldn't forget Jake Miller."

"So how did you know he was hearing?"

"Over forty years after Islaygate, what happened was what? James stopped being able to handle his guilt. He thought he deceived people for too long. So he came to the Guardian and told him his story. The Guardian transcribed this story for future generations. But when he approached the Council for what, approving releasing the story, the answer was what? No." Shawn emphasized the sign for *no*. "They did not want to erase the illusion of the war hero James Butcher."

Chapter X: Reflections, IV

"Damn."

Virgil sat there, awestruck, for several minutes. Then he signed, "If people in Clerc knew, wouldn't their jaws hit the cesspit?" Virgil was already shocked when he thought about that memorial for James Butcher standing in Clerc. To think! That place, set up by the proud Deaf, for a hearing guy!

"Exactly," Shawn signed. "If they knew, it would start dissolving the self-identity they built up over many, many years. James Butcher did not only represent winning the Great War. He also represented Clerc's power over the world. That was his burden."

"I can't imagine." Virgil pushed a hand through his hair, letting out a gust of breath. "Butcher went through a lot. He must have hated all that praise since he knew it was all a farce."

"It was difficult for him. He told me he stopped watching TV after the war. Why? He was weary of seeing his face everywhere."

A month later, Virgil was still thinking about what Shawn had told him. Amazing to think that the war was started by some hard partying teenager. Amazing to think that the Clerker hero of the Great War was hearing.

Virgil thought back to the assumption he had at age seventeen, that James Butcher was the ultimate Deaf man. He had to laugh at himself. Butcher wasn't deaf, but he was still a Clerker. He was raised in a culture that embraced its deafness. Clerkers would have thrown him out if they knew the truth.

Jake Miller struggled too. He and his half-brother could pass for each other, but one was raised in Clerc while the other was raised in Milan. They exploited their looks, out of desperation, and both were arrested. If Jake hadn't struggled so much in Milan, he wouldn't have been desperate. He had to lie about who he was to get into the military and only got away with it thanks to someone who figured it out. If James hadn't come along, Jake and Andrew wouldn't have been caught.

The truth was a complicated thing. Lies were made to look like the truth and a truth that sounded false wasn't believed.

Something was bothering him about the Guardian in those stories. Who was he? Shawn had mentioned that the Guardian needed wisdom, but he hadn't mentioned other qualifications.

The nineteen-year-old Guardian couldn't reveal who he was or it would spoil what mystique he had. None of them could reveal who they were. How did they pick the next Guardian? It was strange. Those previous Guardians passed down their stories but not their names. Did the nineteen-year-old feel guilt after he finally matured?

Virgil paced around the palace. Something was bothering him about how Shawn told those stories. The story about how the war started felt so personal, yet it happened over two hundred years ago.

His mind strayed from Guardians to war. Why did it have to happen? Virgil researched more now to supplement what Shawn told him about the Great War. The Guardian was only listed by his title in history books, never by his real name. There was mention of tension between Clerc and Milan in the early days of Eyeth. A history book

summarized it like this: "Clerc was angry that Milan didn't sign and Milan was angry that Clerc didn't speak." But the reason was more than anger over communication, and the key lay in what the nineteen-year-old Guardian did. He encouraged power-hungry people to seek more power. No wonder Bright Island sparked such a debate: both countries wanted more power, and were willing to fight for it. But Milan was the wild card here.

As a teenager, Virgil read many exploratory accounts by people from many different countries, curious to see how people explored a world before Milan rebuilt satellites with new technology. Ironically enough, Milan had one of the fewest numbers of accounts. In contrast, Clerc had one of the highest numbers. Clerkers discovered where the north and south poles were. Milan jumped to fight for the island after it was initially discovered by one of their countrymen.

After sight-hearing Shawn's story about how the war started, Virgil thought it was odd that Milan was fighting for Bright Island and odder that a Lanner found it. Why would they fight when they didn't fight at all before?

Shawn summoned Virgil one day to the Clerc Room in the Hall of Countries. They sat down and Shawn signed, "What did you think about?"

Virgil signed, "I thought about the Guardian and the war. I don't understand why Clerc started the war and Milan didn't. It wasn't only the Guardian pushing them into war. There was more."

Shawn nodded, his face grim. "You're correct. It was about power. Men want power. Men from Clerc, with their history, more so."

"They couldn't get power long ago on Old Earth, but here on Eyeth, they can."

"Correct. That's why Clerc wanted Bright. They wanted more. When Milan, a country they disliked, refused to give them what they wanted, they became angry. The Guardian pushed them enough into getting it."

The war, Shawn signed, escalated after the Islaygate victory. Clerker soldiers marched to the Milan capital, Clarke, and take the president hostage. There, James Butcher proudly declared Clarke as property of Clerc. From there, Clerc took over. Within twenty-five years, the education system was changed too. In Lanner schools, less time was spent on learning how to speak and more on learning how to sign so the students could become full citizens of the Clerc Empire.

"Full citizens?"

"Qualifications? One: they had to be profoundly deaf on at least one audiological frequency. Two: they had to be completely fluent in Ameslan. Three: they had to pledge allegiance to Clerc."

Virgil's lip curled in disgust.

"Clerc moved on to Q and Pegasus. Pegasus didn't resist, but Q put up a huge fight. Both countries fell. Clerc moved on to England, then Keller and Wheel." With their brute force, they took most of Americana, one country after another. "When their Empire was declared as being most of Americana, except for Gallaudet, one requirement was what? All schools use Ameslan. Speech was forbidden in those schools. Clerc's laws for their country and empire were identical."

"After they took over Americana, what did they want?" Virgil asked. "They got everything they wanted with Americana. What else was there?"

"The world," Shawn signed, and Virgil winced. "They ran their American empire while working on taking over the world and making all of Eyeth Clerc's property."

Virgil's eyes were downcast. Then he looked up. "How did Clerc fall?"

"People took it down from inside."

Virgil thought about what he read as a teenager. He read a lot about the rebels. The rebels, the books said, were the ones responsible for bringing the Clerc Empire down and restoring world peace. Had a Guardian inspired or helped them? "The rebels?"

"Someone wrote about them." Shawn smiled. "She got what she wanted."

"Who's *she?*" Virgil asked, curious.

"Let me tell you a story…"

Chapter XI: Forcing the Mold

When the Guardian was age twenty-six, he traveled the world, signing and speaking with people along the way. Eyeth had passed the century mark, but times were rough. Clerc had over fifty years' worth of work poured into its empire, and it didn't seem like it would stop anytime soon.

For the Guardian, subjectively speaking, it was three years since his wake-up call and the making of his helmet, making himself more professional. Three years of him trying to undo what he had done. No progress made the Guardian's frustration grow.

In the country of Wheel on an official visit, he made a speech. At the end, he did a questions and answer session with his audience. One young woman in particular, silver threads running down her arms and hands and circling around her joints like almost everyone else there, quickly raised her hand, so the Guardian called on her.

She signed, "What are you doing to help people in countries other than Clerc?"

Everyone else stared. It was rude to mention activities outside the Empire.

The Guardian was unfazed. "I'm working on helping them gain independence."

"Are you helping with the Movement?"

Movement? This was a first. The audience was annoyed now, and the Guardian didn't want them to be angry. He told the woman, "I will arrange for my liaison to meet with you. Give your address to my representatives when you leave."

After the session finished, the Guardian retrieved the young woman's address. He set up a summons for her to meet in a park square the next day.

On that day, he sat on a park bench, wearing his disguise of contemporary clothes instead of his Guardian uniform. A little before the appointed time, he saw her approaching, the silver threads of her exoskeleton glinting in the sun. "Hello. I'm the liaison for the Guardian," he signed, standing up and extending his hand. He then introduced himself.

"Wait, isn't that the name of one of the First Founders?"

"I get that all the time. Annoying!" He laughed it off.

Her name was Trisha. After her parents realized their infant daughter had cerebral palsy, they sent her to Wheel because that country could take better care of her than they could. Trisha was taken in as an orphan and adopted into a foster family. She had a good education and excellent physical therapy through her exoskeleton growing up, but something always felt missing.

"You know Wheel doesn't run on its own?" she asked him.

"How does it work?"

"Keller and Clerc manage outside happenings for us, but we have a government for inside events."

Growing up, Trisha knew some Wheel citizens who were unhappy about how the country was run, but she ignored them. Like many others did, Trisha figured they were crazy and upset about other things. She was fine with her run through Wheel's system, but as she got older, she noticed more.

"I didn't understand why teachers forced us to sign," Trisha told him. "One of my friends, Jill, was from where? Milan. Jill's speaking could be understood more than her

signing. Her hands always had trouble moving right even with our threads…" She flexed her hand, showing the silver thread of her exoskeleton running up and around her fingers. "…so when we had to sign, Jill fell behind fast."

The teachers told their classes that perfect signing was required to be a good citizen. The ones who struggled with their hands the most were sent to extra rounds of physical therapy.

"I was one of those who struggled a lot. My hands got better, but my signing was iffy."

Despite her imperfect signing, she made many friends during her time in school. She had one good group of friends during her last few years in school.

One day, one friend, Kirk, had an idea. "Why don't we travel after we graduate?" he suggested. "We need to see more of the world!"

Trisha signed, "I can look up group tours! I know there's one in Keller that shows you what it's like to have Usher Syndrome!"

"True-business?" Kirk was interested. "Cool!"

"I want to wander around too," another person signed.

They set up a group tour for Keller. Kirk worked it out so that they could go on the tour and later be able to wander around one of the cities there on their own.

They worked for a year after they graduated to save up enough money for the trip.

In the park square, the Guardian asked Trisha, "A year? Didn't you all want to go?"

"We knew we'd be going," Trisha told him. "We weren't too worried about the time."

After flying in via jet, the group of friends arrived in Keller, finding their hotel, then their tour group.

The tour, for the first day or so, went well for Trisha. The guide's Common Sign was understandable enough and many of the fascinating exhibits were interactive. Trisha was restless. They were told to stay with the group most of the time but she wanted to get out and explore now.

On the second day, Trisha took matters into her own hands. As the group headed down a street, she lagged behind in the back. While turning, Trisha walked in the other direction.

She was careful to watch out for the paths marked out with ropes. At least the electro-pulses of her exoskeleton worked well here and there weren't too many rough patches. But home had wide and smooth paths. Here, the paths were narrower, rougher and had railings or rope on either side, so she was always fearful of running into someone by accident or tripping and causing her exoskeleton to be thrown off balance and malfunction.

Some of the people, she noticed, had canes, but others didn't. Some signed into each other's hands. Others signed into each other's faces.

Trisha noticed a young man, wearing dark glasses, standing alone. She walked up to him and signed, "Hello!"

He didn't glance at her, even though she had approached him from the side. He should have been able to see her out of the corner of his eye.

Trisha faced him and signed, "Hello!"

He noticed her and signed, "Hello!"

She introduced herself and so did he. His name was Michael and he had grown up here in Keller. He offered to show her around and she accepted.

Before they started walking, he told her, "Just so you know, I have Usher syndrome."

"What's that?"

"I can't see anything out of the corner of my eyes. I can see this much." Michael held out his hands to indicate his range of vision. "You have to look directly at me so I understand you."

He showed her around Keller, explaining some of the adaptations they had set up. They had the usual adaptations for the deaf along with many other adaptations meant for the blind. "Nothing with sound," Michael told her.

"What about those who became blind first?" Trisha asked. He had explained a bit more about Usher syndrome to her, including the different types.

"They could benefit too," Michael signed. "But here, it's more about tactile things."

"You rely on your hands that much?"

"If my hands were cut off, I'm dead." He stuck his tongue out, faking being dead, and smiled.

As his tour wound down, they ran into Trisha's tour group. Trisha gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry, I have to go."

"Wait!" Michael pulled out a piece of paper and wrote something on it. "Call me."

They talked on the videophone that night and discovered they had a lot in common. Michael and Trisha both loved bad jokes and talking about movies. They were discussing a recent movie when Trisha realized something. "...wait, can't your vision narrow?" she asked him.

He was silent. Then he signed, a grim expression on his face, "That's why I enjoy as much of life as I can before my vision narrows."

The subject of their conversation turned to Wheel and Michael signed, "I wouldn't mind visiting."

"You can come visit me," Trisha told him.

Trisha's tour group came home. On the plane, Trisha told her friends about Michael.

Jill signed, "He seems like a great guy! But..."

"But what?"

"He isn't like us. How can he understand?"

"He doesn't see the threads. He doesn't care!"

"True-business? But that's part of who you are."

"Michael's vision is part of who he is, but I don't care either."

Jill stopped after that. Trisha didn't care if people judged her for being with someone from Keller.

Michael came to visit a month later. She met him at the airport and they embraced. On the shuttle bus ride back to the apartment she shared with a few friends,

he signed, "I sight-heard about this new movement in Keller…" He leaned in close and signed, hands low, "…against Clerc."

Trisha's signs lowered. "Clerc? True-business?" Who would dare speak up against the Empire?

"I'll explain at your home," Michael signed. "Not safe here." Then he sat up and signed, "Did you tell your friends about me?"

After he was introduced to and talking a bit with her roommates, he and Trisha went to her room to talk in private.

Michael signed, "In Keller, there's a group of people protesting against Clerc because they want to govern themselves."

"Why govern yourself?"

"Do you remember our talking about school, how we hated it?"

Trisha remembered telling Michael about her experiences in school and how the teachers were signing perfectionists. "I remember that. What about it?"

"If we governed ourselves, we could have better schools," Michael signed. "We wouldn't have to worry so much about signing perfect Ameslan. We could decide everything for ourselves. Clerc only thinks about those who are deaf and able. What about those who aren't?"

It seemed a lot better to Trisha now. "We should set up a group here too!"

"Easy," Michael warned. "One group in England struggled. They expanded too fast and the government shut them down, fast! Our group has several hundred people, but it's all underground."

With Michael's help, Trisha decided what to do and how to do it. Then she discussed it with her roommates. After some explanations, they agreed to help Trisha. Michael stayed in Wheel, helping Trisha with the movement and gathering together more people in support of their plan to break Wheel away from the Empire.

The Guardian spoke of a wake-up call, which caught Virgil's attention. "Wake-up call? What happened?"

"Nothing you need to know."

"But I had a wake-up call too!"

"Listen now."

Michael explained his Usher syndrome to Trisha. "Usher syndrome? I've sight-heard of that. You become progressively deaf-blind, right?"

"Yes. Michael had Type II, meaning he became deaf first and his vision later limited."

Trisha liked the idea of her country governing itself. "Of course it's better. Being in control of yourself is a lot better than someone else pulling the strings."

"She grew up like that. Same with many people she knew. Would you be like that too, growing up there? It took that Keller group a great deal of courage to even start.

"By the time she came to see me," Shawn continued signing, telling the end of Trisha's story. "she and Michael had a few hundred Wheel citizens in their movement. I thought her idea was great. I'd been thinking about how to stop Clerc—"

"Wait." Virgil stood up. "Me? I? Who's the Guardian here?"

Shawn didn't dare sign anything more.

The realization struck Virgil like a rock falling from the sky. "It was YOU the whole time?" he yelled, speaking English and signing. "How? Impossible! The only way you could have done all that is if you had a time machine—"

"Or cryosleep," Shawn signed.

"...cryosleep?" Virgil didn't understand the compound sign. *Sleep*, he understood, but the *cryo-* part of the compound was the older version of the sign *frozen*. Frozen sleep? What did that mean?

"It's where your functions are suspended for some time. The Committee explained to the Intergalactic Council that the Guardian needed to be around one year out of every ten," Shawn told a stunned Virgil. "And it wouldn't be practical to have the Guardian doing nothing for nine years. It was cheaper to use cryosleep than replacing the Guardian a few times a century."

Virgil was processing this. "So... that nineteen-year-old boy who started the war, that was you?"

Shawn's eyes refused to meet Virgil's.

"And you've been the only Guardian of Eyeth all this time?"

"Yes." Shawn looked up, his greenish-brown eyes full of guilt.

"...that's how you know Zen Daniels. It makes so much sense." Virgil ran his hands through his curls, pacing around the classroom for several minutes while Shawn studied his hands lying in his lap. Virgil half-spoke, half-signed to himself, mumbling in his native Gallian while his hands darted back and forth between Pidgin and Ameslan. Sometimes his hands would move in English or cue.

Then he froze and looked at Shawn. When Shawn looked up, Virgil signed and spoke, "So you knew that people on Eyeth were suffering because of your actions?" His signing was more frenzied and his speech slurred worse with each word.

Shawn's hands didn't move.

"You partied away like an idiot and didn't give a shit. Thousands in the world suffered under the Clerc government. The idiot who's supposed to be in charge of the world wasted his life and did nothing to help!"

"I am only human."

"You screwed up! You have too much power. It's disgusting, how people at home will bow down, lick your boots like you're some god." Virgil stared at Shawn, his lip curling.

"I am only human. I'm not God. I didn't ask for this job."

"You were supposed to be perfect. Do you have any idea what we learn about you in school?" Virgil glared at Shawn. "You're shown as this unknown judge who controls the world. Jesus followers sign, what, they haven't seen God, but he judges the world. That's what you do. You are God."

Shawn rose. "I am not God. I did my best. I am only human."

Virgil's hands twitched, then he stormed out, stomping his feet as hard as he could.

Chapter XII: A Troubled Youth

For the next few days, Virgil stayed in his room. The palace servants reported that he only requested food and books.

While Virgil stewed away, Shawn meditated. He thought on what things were said. Perhaps the truth should have come out much earlier. But like anyone else on Eyeth, Virgil saw the Guardian as the unknown judge of the world, his God. If he was told who his teacher was from the start, he wouldn't have believed it, wouldn't have stayed as long as he did. All of Shawn's atonement didn't matter to Virgil either way.

A week passed. Shawn decided it was time. The next time Virgil requested food, Shawn asked to bring it in himself and was given the passcard.

He carried the covered tray up to Virgil's room. After placing the tray on the special stand, he unlocked the door.

Virgil was sitting in the corner, his back to the doorway. His face turned a little to the left, his jaw moving up and down. Shawn couldn't understand what he said. He brought in the tray and set it down on the meal table. Then he stood back, hands laced, and waited for Virgil to receive his food.

His apprentice turned around and started to stand up, but when he saw Shawn, his eyes bulged and he fell down. Shawn signed, "Good evening, my student. How are you feeling?"

Virgil tried to get away, using a kind of backwards crab walk, but he backed up into the corner. His mouth moved again.

Shawn walked over to Virgil's bed and sat down, facing Virgil. "Sign, please," he signed. "I'm not hearing."

"That's the problem!" Virgil spat out, speaking and signing. "You deaf idiots, you think you can run the world. Old Earth had it right! Hearing people were in charge—"

Shawn knelt in front of him then slapped him across the face. "Stop."

Virgil blinked twice, his dark blue eyes wide.

"What's wrong with you? You talked about full privilege. Now you're speaking, saying how hearing people should run the world. Who are you?"

Virgil looked down. His hands moved, and he slowly looked up at Shawn. "I'm a hearing boy who grew up hearing that people like us should run the world. Then my ears broke and I didn't know who to believe."

"You need to decide who to believe," Shawn signed. "I struggled too when I was a very young man. I was younger than you when I was chosen as the Guardian..."

It was over a year since the first colonist group arrived on Eyeth. The First Founders, consisting of Zen Daniels, his mentee Shawn Wright, Zen Daniels' friend Skylar Tyler and Skylar's mentee Mark, were all granted leader positions upon their arrival a year earlier.

Zen Daniels was now in talks with a group of people who were the interim government system for Eyeth. Shawn, then sixteen, didn't care. His job was easy. A lot of people in his city, Mace, looked up to him. Several months in, some people invited him to their parties and he had lots of fun. They offered him alcohol, but Shawn politely turned them down, thinking himself too young to drink.

Sometimes Zen Daniels would come to Pegasus or Shawn would come to Clerc and they would banter for hours. On one particular occasion, he told Shawn, "Those interim people want to set up a judge."

"Judge? For-for?"

"Yeah. You know how we Guardians of the Gate judged people, made sure they were worthy of Ray? To make sure it was all misfits and no normals coming through. You know why, Wright?"

"Daniels, is a bunch of misfits the perfect target? Always, my friend, always," Shawn recited and they both laughed. It was something Zen Daniels always said.

Then Zen Daniels grew serious. "This judge is supposed to travel around and make sure Eyeth stays a Deaf world."

"Not bad."

"This judge checks on the world once every ten years."

Shawn tilted his head. "So he can relax for nine years?"

"No, you dummy." Zen Daniels smacked him on the side of the head and Shawn grinned sheepishly. "They want to use cryosleep."

"Oh." Shawn nodded, not wanting to ask and look stupid.

"And they want me for that." Zen Daniels scowled. "I wanna relax. I've been working my ass off for this Eyeth thing for three, four years now. Crazy how time zooms. But we're all here, I got what I wanted and I'm done."

"Why you?"

"Because I started this whole fucking thing." Zen Daniels tilted his chair back and spread his arms. "I'm responsible for all this. Therefore I must manage it too. But I don't want the job. I started this mess, and it's out of my control." His arms dropped to his sides and his eyes closed. Then his dark eyes snapped open and his feet landed back on the ground.

"Hey, I know you're a good guy, Wright."

"Better than you?"

"Close enough." Zen Daniels grinned. "You know why I picked you in the first damn place, right?"

"You saw me reading a history book, and you asked me why I was reading it. I told you it was for fun," Shawn recited. It was an old story between them, one that dated back to when he was twelve years old.

"Yeah. You're brilliant with that history shit. You know lots and lots of names I don't know, years I don't care about, and places I'll never touch."

Shawn shrugged one shoulder. "Some people think I'm weird for liking that stuff."

Zen clapped Shawn on the shoulder. "Man, you're not weird at all! I think it's great!"

"Great? But it's all dusty books."

"In those dusty books, there's all of history's good stuff, but history's fuck-ups are there too. I wish I knew more about those."

"Then crack a fucking book?"

Zen Daniels laughed again at Shawn's daring. "And I've seen you with your people. I know, I know, those fuckers didn't like you that much at first, but they like you now. You're a natural."

Shawn's hands stammered out, "Me? A natural? All I did was tell these guys who weren't recognized enough that they were great. That's all."

"You know what one of those guys told me? Before you recognized him, saw that he was working as hard as any other fucker, nobody else would work with him. They knew about his fucked-up family and didn't want to touch him. You saw past his family, saw that here was a genuinely good man who couldn't escape his past, and you gave him a huge boost."

Shawn smiled, remembering. He'd felt bad, seeing that man continue working in that factory, alone every day while everyone else worked in groups, talking and laughing. He'd seen how this guy turned out more products with less defects than everyone else, and told his boss, who gave the man an award, giving him more recognition and acceptance.

"You have a fucking gift for this shit, Wright. You should give back to the world."

"How?"

"Find all the people who make a difference, bump them up, bump the fuckers down, make our world run smoother. Oh, and keep everyone deaf. That's what that Committee wants. Wright, you wanna live forever?"

Shawn shrugged. "I guess."

"Do you want to talk to people, give them that boost?"

"Sure."

"You'd make a great Guardian!"

Shawn thought Zen Daniels was kidding until a week later. As he was woken up by a woman in a government uniform, he realized that Zen Daniels really did intend to make him Guardian. After he got dressed, he was escorted to a waiting helicopter. The helicopter took him from Pegasus to Zonia, the top-secret government zone located on an island.

He was escorted into a granite monstrosity of a building. As soon as Shawn entered the meeting room where all of the interim government committee was sitting, he could feel their confused eyes on him.

One of them signed, pointing at Shawn on *boy*, "Why is a *boy* here?"

Shawn signed, "Zen Daniels sent me."

"Is this a joke?"

"No, sir."

The committee members all exchanged looks. Two of them, sitting next to each other, signed something under the table. Shawn was sure it wasn't anything good.

Some were more open, talking about how Zen Daniels was playing a huge joke on all of them, sending a boy to be in charge of a whole planet. A boy! He was only age sixteen, at the most.

A weight settled into Shawn's stomach. This was so much like what had happened in Mace when he was introduced as their mayor. Zen Daniels had escorted him there and

told the locals that he was to be their mayor now. They were suspicious until Shawn explained his role in the founding of Eyeth.

Back on Ray, Shawn had told Zen Daniels while he was on those Network forums that they wouldn't take him so seriously if they knew he was so young. Zen Daniels laughed it off and told him, "Wright, it's the ideas that are important. It's not about me; it's about Deaf civilization."

Shawn repeated his words, signing, "Hey, guys. It's not about me. It's about Deaf civilization. I'm here to keep this world in order."

Those who remembered Zen Daniels talking about Deaf civilization looked at him with admiration. One, clearly the leader, looked at him and signed, "So you signed that you were sent by Zenophon Daniels?"

"Yes, sir."

"We offered the job of Guardian of Eyeth to Zen Daniels. He recommended you, Shawn Wright, instead. Accept?"

Shawn stood there, dumbstruck. He never thought last week's conversation would lead him here. From what Zen Daniels told him, this job was a lot of responsibility for an adult. At age twenty-five, Zen Daniels was far more mature and better suited than Shawn, who barely could handle his mayoral duties.

The official signed "If you refuse the job, you have to recommend a replacement, which we will then consider."

A replacement! Zen Daniels had already talked to Skylar, so he was out. Skylar's mentee was also out. Shawn was out of options.

Shawn thought about what his mentor told him. Could he handle this job? Zen Daniels said that as Guardian, Shawn could use his gift to boost good people and bump the bad people down. He could get to live forever and talk to people, solve their problems. If anything went bad, the Committee could help him.

He signed, "I will accept."

"Why couldn't you explain that you couldn't take the job?" Virgil signed.

Shawn signed, "I felt like I had no other option. If a Founder couldn't take it, then who else would ensure that our vision for Eyeth would true-business continue? I didn't want to let down Zen Daniels and his vision."

The committee official told Shawn what he was expected to do. He would come to Zonia the day before his birthday in September and go into the special cryosleep. The official also explained about the cryosleep process, telling Shawn that after arriving at the one-bed facility, he would be led through the slow shutdown procedures before going into the cryosleep. Shawn would, in cryosleep, close his eyes only to open them a second later, nine years later in reality.

Shawn went home and didn't feel any different. So he was going to travel around the world and talk to people. Cool.

The next day, his videophone's answering machine was maxed out with messages from various people. Most addressed him as "Guardian," and Shawn figured out what happened by checking the Network.

Digi-papers all over the world announced that the Guardian of Eyeth was selected: one of the First Founders, like the Committee wanted.

Shawn watched all the messages. Many were enthusiastic. One girl fainted mid-message. There were a range of communication styles too, as shown with all the SEE colonists, Milanners and Clerkers who called. He decided this was his first chance at talking with the people of his world, and accepted a few invitations.

At first, he limited himself to a few, but the volume of invitations grew all summer, coming from as low as some little kids in Pegasus wanting him to come to their birthday party to as high as government officials inviting him to their galas. One month before he was to turn age seventeen, the Guardian was known as a cool guy who was always down to hang out with the people. Some digi-columnists wrote that he should be taking his job far more seriously. More people paid attention to the writings and vlogs of the columnists who lauded the Guardian, signing that it was so great to see someone in charge who was willing to mingle.

Before his birthday, the Guardian kept himself busy. He wished he could have hopped from party to party around the world, going for twenty-four hours straight, but he had been advised to slow down on socializing.

A helicopter came to his house in Mace to take him to the palace, and the Guardian stepped out, dressed in his robes. As he stepped on, he saw some people come out of their homes to see what was going on with the vibrations they had felt coming from the helicopter. He imagined a massive crowd of fans cheering and clinging to him, and then he imagined shaking them off and waving goodbye. As it was, only a few

people—his neighbors that he had been good friends with even before becoming Guardian—did wave goodbye to him.

In the eleventh year of Eyeth, Shawn Wright woke up from cryosleep on his seventeenth birthday. He was then taken to a classroom where he caught up at his own pace on what happened in the last ten years.

After his release into the world with the first installment of his Guardian back pay, Shawn looked up Zen Daniels for a visit.

"That was your first priority?" Virgil signed. "I thought it would have been finding your future party buddies..."

Shawn gave Virgil a cold look. "I wasn't that terrible until later."

Zen Daniels wasn't listed in the directory, so Shawn found his friend Skylar, who was listed as living in a small city in Clerc. Shawn flew down there.

By now, Skylar was married with a young son. He greeted Shawn warmly, but Shawn saw that Skylar seemed mistrusting. Skylar had no idea where Zen Daniels was. "He disappeared a couple years ago," Skylar told Shawn. "He didn't sign anything about you. He signed he wanted to travel."

"He probably left the planet," Virgil signed.

"That's what I thought, years later," Shawn signed.

Shawn talked some more with Skylar, then he left, disappointed. He continued talking with people, but while accepting more invitations, he kept an eye out for Zen Daniels. All he wanted was to ask his old mentor what he would have done on this job. As

the first Guardian, Shawn had zero idea of what he was doing, and Zen Daniels would have known more.

"What happened to him?" Virgil asked. "Seems like an interesting guy. He came up with the idea for Eyeth, correct?"

Shawn signed, "No, he just pointed out the problem on Ray. Skylar was the one who came up with the idea for our own colony. I named the planet based on an old story."

The young Guardian decided he'd eventually figure it out. For now, he was having fun with all the invitations he was getting, so he could connect with people on that level.

The year he was age twenty-two, he got an invitation from a Zenophon Daniels and an invitation to one of his circle friends' parties, a huge all-nighter event. Shawn, tossing aside the invitation from some old fart he had long forgotten, accepted the second invitation. Zen Daniels waited for an old friend who would never come while he lay in a Clerc hospital, now in his sixties and dying.

That was Shawn's life until he got his wake-up call at age twenty-three.

Chapter XIII: Wake-Up Calls

"What an asshole," Virgil signed.

"I agree," Shawn signed.

Virgil raised his eyebrows. "You're the asshole here. Why the hell did you get that job?"

"They wanted a First Founder. Zen Daniels was perfect for the job. He wasn't available, why, he didn't want it. I was picked instead."

Virgil shook his head in disgust. "How did you find out Zen Daniels was dying if you tossed that invitation?"

"His daughter contacted me years later."

Virgil nodded, chin in hands, eyes down. Then his blue-green eyes flicked up. "What happened when you were age twenty-three?"

By age nineteen, girls were swarming around Shawn. He gave in to the pressure and enjoyed himself at age twenty.

One girl in particular, a pretty redhead from Clerc, became attached to him. The norm was that after he finished once with a girl, Shawn walked away and was done. But this time, when he walked away, she followed. Since it was nice to have company, he let her stick around.

The girl, Pepper, was happy to follow him around the world. In the last few months before his twenty-first birthday, she acted much more distant. She stayed at their temporary base more than she went out with Shawn. A few weeks before his birthday, he asked Pepper what was going on. Her hands rose up like she wanted to get something

out, but she let them drop and signed that it was nothing. Since it wasn't that important, he didn't press the issue.

Shawn had the natural assumption that everyone knew how long he would stick around, so he didn't bother to tell people he was leaving. He once had a goodbye party at age seventeen, but found it too difficult to get through.

Two days before his twenty-first birthday, he left for Zonia to go into his nine-year-long cryosleep. Pepper went into a panic on his birthday, asking everyone where he went, but they didn't know. She sight-heard that the man she had been with was the Guardian, but she couldn't believe that. Why would a man in such a high position be with her when he had so many better options?

A few decades passed. Shawn woke up at age twenty-three. After his quick catch-up, he went out into the world as usual.

In Laurent, Clerc, he was watching the people around him, when a young man approached. The young man was tall and lanky, like Shawn, but he had red hair. "You!" He pointed at Shawn, who was sitting on a park bench, eyes wide. "Shawn Wright?" His accent was distinctively Clerker.

"I am Guardian Shawn Wright, yes," Shawn told the young man. "Who are you?"

"I am your son. My name is Joshua Wright." Joshua explained that his mother told him all his life that his real father was a lowlife who left her before she could even tell him of her pregnancy. After realizing that her baby's father was the Guardian himself, she told her son to stay away from him. "She said you couldn't be trusted," Joshua told his biological father. "You didn't tell her who you were."

"I didn't need to. Everyone knew how long I'm staying here on Eyeth and about my age disorder. If she didn't know, that's her fault. I'm sorry, Joshua. How old are you?"

"Nineteen. Age disorder?"

"I don't look much older than I was when I first came here."

"I thought you'd look much older. My mother signed how you weren't responsible and left her to raise me alone. She couldn't track you down to sue you for child support because the Council blocked her."

"I should have asked her. Do you need money?"

"Money? You kidding me?" Joshua scowled. "I thought the Guardian was supposed to make sure there's peace on Eyeth. You know there's a war on?" Without another word, he left.

Shawn stared after Joshua, trying to remember. Had they mentioned anything about this war in the classroom...? Now that he thought about it, he couldn't really remember much of the history the Council people covered with him in those sessions. He only remembered wanting to get it over with so he could go find his new buddies.

He tapped on the side of his glasses, bringing up the computer function. On the computer screen he now saw projected in front of him, he poked JournoApp. He skimmed the world's digi-papers, asking for translations of headlines whenever necessary. If his son noticed a war and Shawn's friends of the year signed nothing about it, someone was doing something wrong. It certainly wasn't Joshua.

Clerc newspapers were free of front page war news, keeping them buried deep. But Lanner newspapers, Pegasus newspapers, Englander newspapers and many others screamed about the Clerc Empire on their front pages.

How had he never noticed? That night, at a party, Shawn quizzed people about the war. It turned out that most Clerkers knew but didn't care.

"Why should we?" one told Shawn. "Our country's winning."

The next day, Shawn asked people on the street about the war. One, a Great War veteran, told him some things that came off as bragging. Shawn decided he wouldn't have much luck in Clerc, so he flew into a few different countries and talked to more people.

In Clerc, either people were proud that they were winning or they didn't care. Outside of Clerc, many people were upset with and wanted to flick Clerc off the map.

As Shawn talked to more and more dissatisfied people, he realized that one of the goals of being a Guardian was making sure that everyone was satisfied with the world. With all the complaints about Clerc, Shawn saw that he had let Clerc go out of control.

He did some research on the war. When he read that it started after Clerc seized Bright Island, he violently pushed the book aside, making it fly off the library table. Then he buried his head in his arms and tried not to cry.

Thinking back, he could remember that meeting. He remembered how bored he was and how he had dismissed everything because he was hung over and wanted to go back to his friends. How dearly he would pay for his selfishness. There was his son, missing out on having a father. There was the world, suffering because one selfish boy didn't want to do his job.

At age twenty-three, Shawn resolved to himself that he would fix everything. The first thing he did was make a helmet. Using a beat-up metal trash can with a hole cut in it and a store-bought mask, he created his Guardian disguise. He later worked with a Council designer to create a better Guardian uniform. Much later, he would appoint a special team to cut out all mentions of the Guardian's name from the history books, only allowing the most classified documents to go untouched.

With this disguise, he could separate himself into two identities. The Guardian half, wearing the mask, would parade around the world while Shawn Wright, as a common citizen, could better observe and interact with the people. He would undo the damage and make Eyeth a better place.

He also resolved to get in touch with Joshua and build a relationship with him. Later, he would speak with generations of Joshua's descendants, who called him "Grandfather."

Pepper wanted to follow Shawn around. "Bad idea," Virgil signed. "You don't let crazy attach to you."

"How do you know she was crazy?" Shawn signed.

"Most girls want a famous guy once. A girl who wants to stick around is obsessed and crazy."

"Excellent analysis. That should serve you well in the future."

"I want to save it for someone special."

"Good luck with that."

Joshua missed out on having a father. "What's so great about having a father? Mine beat me when my ears started breaking."

"Not all fathers are like that. J--- was a wonderful father to me."

"Who's J---?"

"I will tell you later."

Virgil thought to himself that Shawn would never tell him. After Shawn finished, Virgil asked, "How long has it been since that wake-up call happened?"

"Over twenty years."

"Over twenty- You're kidding me!" To Virgil, Shawn looked much older than his mid-forties. "How old are you?"

"In my body's time, I am age forty-seven. In real time, I am age three hundred and twenty-seven."

Virgil did some mental arithmetic and his jaw dropped. "You were born in the *twenty-first century*?"

"Two thousand and ninety," Shawn signed.

"Why do you look so old?"

"My job is difficult. You sure you want it?"

Virgil wore a half-smile. "You screwed it up for yourself. I think I'll do better."

"True-business?"

"I learned from someone, unlike you." Virgil's half-smile now spread and turned cocky.

"Think on that tonight. I will call you later." Shawn dismissed Virgil with a wave of his hand.

That night, Virgil meditated.

If Shawn was born over three hundred years ago... it would explain so much. Why he used archaic signs. How he knew Zen Daniels.

If Shawn screwed up so bad, then he must feel awful about it too. Virgil thought about his confusion over the Guardian. He hadn't known about the cryosleep, so he couldn't have known about the Guardian staying the same over three hundred years. If Shawn felt awful, then he would want to cover up his actions. If Virgil knew his teacher's true identity from the start, then he wouldn't have trusted Shawn so much.

Virgil's mind wandered to the matter of Zen Daniels, who refused the job, even though he was capable. He turned it over to his too-young mentee and left the planet, a colony he had helped found, to go travel to other places. What was going through his head? Yes, he returned, but he must have been disappointed in some way. He accomplished his dream, but if things were going well, he wouldn't have left. Maybe Zen Daniels had wanted more unity for Eyeth. But if division started while he was still here, no wonder he left, possibly out of disgust.

Virgil resolved to ask Shawn more about Zen Daniels.

A few days later, Virgil tracked down Shawn, who somehow arranged it so that he was nowhere to be found for a few days. He was finally found in the library, reading a dusty orange book.

Virgil bent his head down and read as far as "History of the Am-" but the book dropped to the table before he could make the rest out. He looked up with wide innocent blue eyes into Shawn's annoyed brown-green eyes.

"What are you reading?" Virgil asked.

Shawn wouldn't answer. Instead, he signed, "Why're you looking for me?"

Virgil sat down across from him. "I wanted to ask you a question and tell you something. Why did Zen Daniels leave? Was he not happy?"

Shawn looked down at his book. "...yes. He didn't like all the division on Eyeth. He hoped deaf people could unite as a whole and forget about their communication differences."

Virgil had to laugh at that. "Communication is everything. I almost got phonodes forced into my brain because of some stupid shit like the difference between signing and talking!"

"I recall a doctor telling me about how he invented phonodes. He made them for late-deafened people so they could get hearing back. But he later tried to get phonodes banned after some people forced it on others."

"I can't believe Zen Daniels thought unity could happen." Virgil shook his head. "The day all deaf people agree on something is the day a greybird flies to the bottom of the ocean!"

"God may shoot down that greybird, make it fly there. Someone could prove you wrong."

Virgil's face hardened. "I wasn't slapped across the face when I was young and naïve. I had my innocence stolen from me."

"You think I was innocent?"

Virgil had tried to find a way to excuse Shawn's actions. He came to the conclusion that Shawn was innocent and far too naïve to understand what he was doing. An impressionable and inexperienced young man would be in the same situation. "That's what I think."

"I was hiding from the world, Virgil."

"I had to face the world starting when? I was age thirteen. I didn't have a wake-up call like yours."

After being kicked out from home at age twelve, due to his ears being too broken, Virgil wandered all over Americana and the world.

He found passage on a ship and sailed overseas to Europa. Virgil walked and wandered across the ring-shaped continent. He ended up in a strange country where the letters didn't match those in Anglo or Si5 alphabets. He was trying to figure out a bus map when something heavy hit him over the head.

Thirteen-year-old Virgil woke up in a jail cell. A plate of gruel on the floor awaited him. Not having had food for a few days, Virgil gulped down the gruel, not caring that it tasted funny. The last words he thought before passing out were, "This was a mistake..."

When he woke up, a boy in a sharp military uniform awaited him outside his cell. After deactivating the laser door, the boy greeted him in Common Signs. Virgil answered. Soon, they were conversing in a mixture of Ameslan, Common and Zhestov signs. The

boy explained that Virgil was now in Poccener, a country located at the top of Europa's ring. Poccener was run by one large organization, called the Operation, which had hidden authority higher than the government. The Operation took in foreigners to protect them from the tyranny of the government, jailing them to comply with government regulations but releasing them under certain terms.

Virgil asked what those terms were. The boy told him of a good opportunity: a security job! He would work for one branch of the Operation as a mission guard to ensure that nothing went wrong. Virgil asked if he would be poisoned, and the boy laughed. The gruel was a test. He assured Virgil no more tests.

To Virgil, this job sounded fantastic. He had no idea what to do about money ever since the last of his childhood savings ran out somewhere in Epee. Plus he was assured of a roof over his head and food on the table, which seemed perfect after spending a miserable rainy spring begging for food.

He was taken to the organization headquarters and through someone who knew some Ameslan, Virgil was told what he would do. Every day, he would serve as guard for eight hours and then go to Zhestov classes for two hours. Virgil was curious to learn more languages, so he agreed. He was assigned an apartment which he would share with other guards.

For the first two months, everything seemed fine. Virgil was enjoying his job, even if the guys he worked for gave him a hard time for being so young. After he managed to explain about his situation, a job that took two hours and a lot of miming and acting out

what happened when signs failed, they understood. His roommates saw him as a fellow comrade. Virgil felt accepted at last, something he hadn't felt since he was seven or eight.

But Virgil noticed something odd about the Operation. His comrades assured him that it was most lawful, protecting innocent citizens against the horrors of the government. Yet Virgil, in his guard work, would supervise unethical deals going on between members of the group he worked for and various businesses. For example, whenever he went to the supermarket with comrades for food, beef was twelve bellers a pound. Yet Virgil once saw a negotiation where a group member bought a hundred pounds of beef from a butcher for a hundred and fifty bellers. To get that price, the butcher had to be beaten before finally agreeing to the price. Even at age thirteen, Virgil knew you weren't supposed to hurt the other person you were negotiating with.

Virgil asked one of his comrades, Ivan, about this. Ivan said that was normal if the person wouldn't agree to the Operation price. "It's how things are done here, Comrade G," Virgil was told. That was the usual response to subsequent things he saw over the next two months.

Store window broken in middle of night to get things the owner refused to negotiate for? "That's how things are done, Comrade."

One group member beating another group member for failing to keep his wife quiet in an argument? "That's how things are done, Comrade."

Man beaten bloody over refusing to pay tribute to the Operation? "That's how things are done, Comrade."

Hearing family given beating to render them deaf and therefore equals? "That's how things are done, Comrade."

Woman forced to give up her toddler to the organization as her tribute? "That's how things are done, Comrade."

Virgil had a roof over his head and enjoyed himself other than the atrocities he witnessed, so he kept his hands and head down. He figured he would learn to ignore the negative things he saw. But in the back of his mind, the atrocities he saw kept bothering him.

The group he worked for would sometimes tell Virgil to stand guard while they went into an alley to do something. Virgil never wanted to know what they did after hearing screaming the first time he stood guard. He was always ordered to watch the street and never turn around.

One day, one of the men asked Virgil, "Want to watch us have some fun?" There were four of them that day, so the work was easy.

Virgil shrugged. If it was fun, it couldn't be an atrocity. "Yes," he signed in his slow Zhestov.

"Come with us, come!"

Virgil followed them down an alley. There, a teenage girl was crouching, shivering. Virgil felt the same shallow pitying sympathy for her that he did for other street people. She was dressed in rags and her fair hair was thin.

"You know what's special about her, Comrade G?" the man signed to Virgil

Virgil shook his head.

"She can hear. She's a freak!"

Two of the other men forced and held her down, even with her flailing her limbs in every direction. The first man knelt down and dug his fingers into each of her ears. He pulled out some flesh-colored plugs and showed them to Virgil. "See? She's a filthy liar. You know what we do to filthy liars, Comrade G?"

"What do you do?" Virgil signed the rote question in Zhestov. He was rooted to the spot, afraid of what would happen next. He had sight-heard his comrades' conversations about what they had seen their groups do to people as punishment. And this was a hearing girl.

"We have some fun. Then she goes off to be punished."

One man held down the girl's shoulders while the other two held down her legs. The man who had spoken to Virgil now knelt down in front of the girl, grinning. He signed to her, talking about her crimes and what a horrible person she was. With a swift movement, he tore off her skirt. The girl squirmed, trying to cover herself up, but the men held on.

As the man pulled down his pants and got ready, a grin on his face the whole time, a wave of shock, feeling like a hose of icy-cold water, hit Virgil. Why was he doing this? She didn't want this, with how much she was moving and her expression of terror. The men holding her were making comments about her flopping like a fish. She didn't want this. She was innocent. She couldn't help being who she was. She didn't deserve this!

The girl screamed, arching her back, and Virgil's vision blurred red. He could tell it was from pain. A growl rose up and Virgil jumped onto the man committing the atrocity.

He hit the man over and over, as hard as he could, trying to punish him for daring to punish her. At one point, he grabbed the man's pocketknife and held it in his right fist, making his blows hit harder with his better hand.

When the red in his vision faded, Virgil was left sitting next to the body of the man, a closed pocketknife held in his hand, his fingers full of sharp pain. The man's head was bleeding at a steady rate. Thank goodness his eyes were closed. His body was covered with blood and cuts and bruises. Virgil was also covered in blood and his hands were covered with bruises. Nobody else was around. The girl's plugs lay in a puddle on the dirty cement.

What if the man was dead? Virgil didn't want to know. His hand hurt too much to open, so he fled the alley, pocketknife clutched in his hand.

He returned to the apartment. When one of his comrades, Pyotr, saw his white face, he signed, "You all right?"

Virgil held up his bruised hands and shook his head.

Through a series of yes-and-no questions, Pyotr determined some of what happened and that some of Virgil's fingers on his right hand were broken. He wrote down the name of an Operation-approved hospital. Virgil wanted to ask if he should return, then he realized he couldn't. If he had killed that man, then he could never return due to the bounty put on him.

Pyotr packed a bag for Virgil, smiling. Virgil had a painful smile on. It was nice that he was helping him, but Virgil couldn't even sign goodbye. Pyotr drove Virgil to the hospital and waved him off. As Virgil went through the doors, he stole a quick look over

his shoulder. Pyotr was standing there, looking unhappy. Virgil turned back to face the inside of the hospital and wondered what Pyotr would tell the others tonight. Would they wonder why Comrade G never came home?

After being treated for broken fingers and other injuries, Virgil stayed overnight then he was released. Since the fingers on his right hand were broken, he avoided signing with that hand, strapping it to his side, and learned how to do everything with his left hand.

Two months later, Virgil found a doctor who was willing to take off his cast for free in Deutschland, right before finding a construction job there. His right hand was weakened from the ordeal, so Virgil took it easy on that hand. By his fourteenth birthday, he was mostly left-handed, using his right hand if he forgot how to do something with his left.

"After that, I couldn't trust anyone again," Virgil told Shawn. "I learned to rely on only myself. I wish I knew what happened to that girl." The corners of his mouth were turned down. His eyes were a neutral gray.

Shawn nodded. "When you lived in Gallaudet, were you right-handed?"

"I don't want to be right-handed again..." Virgil trailed off, remembering hitting that man with his right hand, feeling the sharp pain of his fingers breaking, but still going, still wanting to cause more pain than what he felt. "I wish I could have helped that girl more."

"You can do so much."

Virgil looked up, his eyes a bitter gray-brown. "I wish you didn't screw the world up so much."

"On Old Earth, those things still happened. And the world isn't as bad as you think."

Virgil lifted an eyebrow.

"I broke the world, but I fixed it. You can fix it too."

"How?"

Shawn looked outside. "You should go on to bed."

Virgil scowled. "Will you tell me about this tomorrow?"

"I promise I will."

Chapter XIV: Change is Coming

Virgil slept in fits and starts that night. He rushed through breakfast and then met Shawn in the throne room.

"Do you remember Trisha and Michael?" Shawn asked.

"Trisha had cerebral palsy and Michael had Usher Syndrome, yeah. They wanted to start something against Clerc."

"Correct. Now..."

The Guardian, Shawn Wright at age twenty-six, was talking with Trisha in the park. Trisha had told him about her and Michael's movement. Shawn recalled hearing about a few other such movements during his travels. He signed so, and Trisha's face lit up.

She bounced a little and signed, "Others? Really? The government didn't stop them?"

"They were underground, like yours," Shawn assured her. He signed of movements in England and Milan. Representatives for those groups came to speak to his liaison and beg for help. The Guardian told them he would put them in touch with others if he came across them. The Englander and Lanner movements already communicated through a Network channel, picking up on each other's variant of English. It wouldn't be a problem to get the Wheelers involved too, the Guardian told Trisha.

Trisha grinned and beckoned him closer. Then she grabbed him in a tight hug.

After she let go, he signed, "What was that for?"

"Thank you!" she signed back. "We can improve our world! They can hear our story now!"

"Yes, we can." He wore a smile, but his greenish-brown eyes were sad.

"You screwed up," Virgil signed.

"I did," Shawn signed, two signs enough to show guilt. "But you can fix it."

"How?" Virgil echoed his question from the night before.

"By uniting the world." Shawn went on to explain that today, Clerc's power was greatly reduced. Only a memory of its power remained.

"That's one powerful memory."

It was. The reason Virgil knew Ameslan at all was because it was taught in his Gallian school. Many countries' languages were influenced by Ameslan, making it easier for Virgil to learn languages from all over Americana.

"Learning Zhestov, that was hard," Virgil signed. "But English, Pidgin, even Lanner, all were easy to learn!"

"All because of Ameslan," Shawn signed. "The common influence made that easy." Though the power and tyranny were gone, the influence was not.

"When I'm Guardian, should I remove Ameslan influence?"

"No. Keep it."

"Why? It's a sign of negative long-ago events."

"It's part of evolution. It's how Eyeth works. Let me tell you about another culture that was also negative with much influence." Shawn explained to Virgil about the ancient

Roman civilization. Thousands of years ago on Old Earth, they took over their part of the world and their language, Latin, spread out and influenced others' languages. Latin was now dead, but the influence was not.

"Did the Romans have big egos too?" Virgil asked.

"You shouldn't generalize."

Virgil rolled his blue eyes and leaned back in his chair. "I think Clerkers are terrible, still."

"You meet any nice Clerkers?"

Virgil's chair legs met the floor with a crash. "Damn." He rubbed his bristly chin. "Some."

"See? Not all are terrible."

Virgil exhaled through teeth clamped together. "And?"

"As a Guardian, you can't generalize. That's dangerous."

Virgil thought about it. With Shawn's experiences, that made sense. You couldn't dismiss an important prime minister's invitation the same way you dismissed a casual acquaintance's invitation. Everyone needed to be treated in a different way and nobody could be favored.

But it would be hard to unite the world. "How can you have everyone agreeing on something? How did you get people to fight back against Clerc?"

"It took me until I was age thirty. When I was age thirty-one, people thought of me as someone from a fantasy story," Shawn signed.

Starting in his mid-twenties, not long after his wake-up call, he tried to convince people that they had to break free from Clerc. Shawn's breakthrough came after his meeting with Trisha. The leaders of the two other rebel groups, Tyler from England and Patty from Milan, already came to him, but Trisha's group contributed the most to the fledgling rebel network. There was the group in Wheel that Trisha helped found with Michael's help, and there was the group in Keller that Michael already knew about.

This network was astounding. Once it was put into action, the number of groups fighting against Clerc skyrocketed. Trisha and Michael worked with Tyler and Patty. After Michael's vision worsened, Trisha was patient with helping him understand what was going on, signing into his hands what she saw on Network boards before they got a braille reader for the holo-display.

The next time Shawn returned at twenty-seven, the rebellion was underway. At twenty-eight, Shawn received reports that Clerc was trying to shut down the rebels. Suspected rebels were being arrested everywhere. The leaders stayed in hiding and weren't caught, so the rebellion continued in hidden Network channels. Ten years later, the rebels gathered a great army and fought against Clerc. It ended in a stand down with the rebels demanding their rights from the Clerc leaders.

The Clerker leaders caved. The great empire was no more. When Milan seized control of Bright Island, Clerc was finished, officially. Without even the slightest protest, Clerc let surrounding countries hack off pieces of land for themselves until it was reduced to seventy percent of its original size.

"When I woke up on my thirty-first birthday," Shawn told Virgil. "I was hurried through my review on what had happened. Then I put my helmet on and I was taken through various cities all over Americana and a few in Amécen for parades. All these cities used to be in Clerc's empire. They were celebrating me, their hero."

Virgil's blue-green eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened. "You didn't deserve that celebration."

"I didn't," Shawn admitted. "They wanted a hero, someone they could point to and sign that he saved us all."

"They don't talk much about you in history books. They say you were great, but that's it. What a lie."

"You were age twelve when you left. If you continued another year, you would have read more about the Guardian. Publishers send their books and textbooks about me all the time."

"Even in those library books I saw, I didn't see much about you over the past century. I had to go back almost two hundred years to find something on the Guardian. Times have changed, old man." Virgil leaned back and scratched the back of his head.

"What did those books discuss?"

"They discussed the rebels, all that. They mentioned the Guardian once or twice, how he united everyone." Virgil shrugged.

"I was still in the background of Eyeth history." Shawn paused, frowning, then he signed, "If people don't recognize the Guardian as much as they used to, so? The Guardian has a job anyway."

"What job? Unity? That's impossible."

"The countries working with each other, yes. But a united definition of being deaf, no."

"Meaning of being deaf?" Virgil tilted his head. "You may as well write what it means to hear. How can you write down something from the gut? Impossible."

"Why is it impossible? Poets can write down things from our gut. Most people in this world can't hear, but we still struggle. When I was a little boy, I thought all deaf people would work together because we had that one thing in common: our ears."

Virgil threw his head back in a silent laugh. Then he looked back at Shawn and signed, "We're all human, struggling with similar stuff, but we still can't work together. I have a story."

As a child, when his hearing was starting to deteriorate, Virgil looked up deaf people all the time. He discovered that the deaf people his parents and other Gallians hated so much populated most of the world. Young Virgil's eyes widened at that and he looked for the best deaf country.

One book in particular caught his attention. It talked about a wonderful, amazing and beautiful country called Clerc. Clerc was founded as a place for the most elite deaf, therefore it was the best country on Eyeth. Seven-year-old Virgil's imagination was captured by the flowery descriptions and he made plans to go there one day.

After he was kicked out at age twelve, he made his way to the gates of Clerc first. He made it all the way up to the head of the line before he was questioned about not having papers and then he was thrown out of the line. Virgil walked back to the border of

Milan in tears. From there, he worked his way up to finding passage on a ship bound for Europa. If he couldn't stay in Americana, he would try Europa.

He had bad luck there, working in construction in Deutschland and Siena for a short time after his disaster. Construction was too much for a young teenager, so Virgil wandered around the rest of Europa until he was able to find passage back to Amécen, and from there, he worked his way back to Americana and continued wandering. At fifteen, while working on his diploma exams, he met Royal in Pegasus, a rare friend who would help him with his Clerc dreams.

"When I was age seventeen, I had to go through Milan to arrive at the Clerc border with the papers Royal gave me," Virgil signed to Shawn. "I almost got caught by some crazy phonode phreaks—"

"Phonode phreaks?"

"They're people who are obsessed with the idea, what, everyone in the world needs phonodes. You know, those round things they shove into Lanners' heads, and boom, they can hear a hundred percent, perfect? I fled before they could F-implant me…"

Chapter XV: A False Eden

Virgil walked through the bluish-green field one June day, humming to himself. A camping backpack hung from his back . He shook his head, thinking of what had happened in Bellham. Never again would he mess with those damned Lanners.

Thank God for his high resistance to anesthesia. Virgil smiled at one of his few happy Gallian memories. As a boy, he got bad headaches and his ears were starting to break. His parents took him to the doctor. After a series of exams, they said they had to operate. Little Virgil was put under on the operating table. He woke up an hour later, screaming, and they scrambled for more gas.

Virgil's father later told him that the anesthesiologist put him under using twice the amount of gas, despite being afraid to kill a little boy. "You were only five, Gil," his father said with his mouth, in words full of pride that Virgil could still understand at that time. "And you were so tough!"

The operation helped some, but his hearing still worsened. Now he was a privileged Eyether. He could pass for normal, as long as nobody knew he was born hearing. He checked a creased map again. The gates weren't far, and he had Royal's papers to get him through.

Two miles later, Virgil saw a very long line of people. He signed in Pidgin to a man standing at the very end, "What's this for?"

"This line's for getting into Clerc," the man signed in Ameslan. His bushy graying eyebrows were so cross and low they almost hid his eyes.

With haste, Virgil switched to his intermediate accented Ameslan. "Oh? How terrible get in now?"

"Very strict." The man turned back and didn't sign another word.

The line proceeded a mile over a few hours. At one point, Virgil signed to the girl behind him, whom he was getting very friendly with, "Save my place, please!" After she agreed, he took off running. Fifteen minutes later, he saw the gates.

Huge Si5 words signed, "Welcome Clerc" over the gates. Barbed-wire fences went as far as he could see across the border. From several yards away, Virgil could see guards in navy blue uniforms signing with people trying to get in. Then he noticed the fence shaking. Following the source of the shaking, he saw a man climbing up. The vibrations of the gunshot and the body hitting the ground echoed under Virgil's feet after the man's fall.

Virgil ran back, taking twenty minutes this time. He signed to the girl, "Excuse me, me just vee-veeing how far."

The girl smiled and they continued their conversation in Ameslan. By talking to this native Clerker girl, Virgil was also studying her expressions and how she moved her hands. Clerkers had some of the most fascinating expressions he'd ever seen in his global wanderings and he was excited to sneak into a country full of those fascinating people. He hoped it was as great as he thought it was going to be.

They chatted as the line moved closer and closer. When they were five hundred feet away, Virgil stopped their conversation so he could observe the people being

processed. The girl tapped on his arm, eager for more conversation, but Virgil asked for her pager code. She gave it to him, winking. He winked back then turned back to watch.

One group held his interest. He'd noticed one of them moving their mouths and wondered to himself if they were late to the race like he was. It would be tricky for them to get through.

They went through, one by one. Virgil watched the mouthflapper. Sure enough, that one was stopped by a guard and told to hand over his papers. The mouthflapper took a long time to find them and then fumbled, dropping his papers.

The guard and Virgil both shook their heads. The guard's video glasses flashed green and he signed something in fluid Ameslan. A few minutes later, two guards in black uniforms took the mouthflapper away.

Virgil got his papers ready and rehearsed to himself, based on the conversations he saw between the guards and people.

When it was his turn, he stepped up and held out his papers. The guard took them, set them aside and signed, "Your name's what?"

"Virgil Garrett." A pseudonym was much easier to explain than his real Englander surname.

The guard asked him about date and place of birth, parentage, country of origin and other questions. Virgil rattled them off as he'd memorized them: February twenty-second, seventeen years before, Clerc, both parents Clerkers who moved to Pegasus when he was small, Pegasus, and so on.

The information matched what was on his papers. Then the guard asked Virgil about his knowledge of Ameslan. Virgil signed that he was raised with it as his first language, but picked up Pidgin from his peers. This explanation was carefully constructed to account for his intermediate knowledge. Virgil expected to pick up enough Ameslan to get to an advanced level once he was inside Clerc on his falsified visitor card.

The visitor card was shown to the guard. Virgil gave a standard explanation about a deaf grandmother from Hotchkiss who was dying and needed her grandson there. It was bullshit, but that explanation got Virgil through. It gave him access to the Last Paradise, that deaf haven, the place where he would belong, once and for all: Clerc.

After he crossed over with his newly printed visitor ID, he saw a road with rows of buses after some walking. A guard stopped him and asked for his ID, then Virgil was directed to a tan-yellow bus that would take him to Hotchkiss.

The city itself was a few hours away, not that bad of a ride. Back in Pegasus, Royal had told him to go to Hotchkiss and meet his great-aunt Edith there. Edith would let Virgil stay with her until Virgil had his false citizen ID, which took more time than a visitor ID to create, and enough money to get where he needed to go.

Virgil alternated between pondering what he would do in Hotchkiss en route and watching the beautiful countryside outside the bus windows. Gallaudet was up north, so most of the year, it was blank and gray. It was only colorful for a short time in the summers. Here in Clerc, it was colorful almost year-round, even with the mountains. Virgil watched a field of flowers go by at one point, fascinated. If Clerc was what he hoped

it would be, he could live here as a proud citizen. He'd wanted to be among his own kind since age seven and this place was his golden opportunity.

The bus arrived in Hotchkiss and Virgil got off with his camping backpack. He watched for a sign that said, "GARRETT" and saw an older woman holding the sign. Virgil waved to her and she dropped the sign to wave back, greeting him with a hug when he was close enough. He was used to hugs by now, thanks to being around Royal, but he was surprised at how long the hug was.

"You're Edith?" Virgil signed after they came apart. "Nice to meet you!"

She smiled big. "Nice to meet you too! How's Royal doing?"

"Wonderful, he's wonderful." As they headed for her car, a blue sedan so old it still used hydrogen, he told her about Royal's latest projects. Royal was a brilliant inventor and Virgil provided him with many ideas during his time in Pegasus. But as always, something came up and Virgil was forced to flee. With Royal, Virgil wasn't happy to leave a true friend, a rarity for him.

She took him to her house and showed him where he would sleep. After he finished unpacking, he went downstairs to chat with Edith over tea and cookies. She told him about the local shop where he'd work, a hologame rental place. Virgil said that seemed great and settled in.

Two months later, Virgil was ready to go. He enjoyed his stay at Edith's house and could see where Royal got his quirky sense of humor from. But now he had his citizen ID and enough money to live in Laurent. His boss at the rental place knew someone over in

Laurent who was willing to give Virgil a job. Virgil told Edith goodbye, having packed all of his things into his new rusty car. Then he

punched in the address and his car took off on a ride comprising of a winding, twisting hour through the mountains.

Arriving there was a huge culture shock. He hadn't expected to have sensory overload directed at his sight. Sure, there were three-dimensional billboards in Hotchkiss, which he got used to. But the ones here in Laurent grabbed you around the neck, demanding that you pay attention. One advertisement, showing off the newest advance in technology ("LOOK! NEW COMPGLASSES! NOW CLEAR!"), consisted of a rod hanging over the highway near a curve in the road. A pair of supersized glasses, missing their arms and chained to the rod, sparkled in the sun. They nearly blinded Virgil, making him pull out his sunglasses and curse whoever designed this abomination. Another advertisement was a giant sculpture of a superhero, his arm reaching for the sky, his fiberglass cape billowing behind him, his foot creating visible cracks in the reddish-orange stone word "SPEECH." A sign overarched nearby, advising travelers to watch for the Lanner menace and report offenders to the police.

Virgil swore that he'd find darker contacts to protect his eyes since his sunglasses weren't enough. This place would not be good for his tendency to get headaches.

His car somehow made it into Laurent. Then he made his way to the apartment building and parked in the garage before dragging his camping backpack to the manager's office, picking up his passcards and going up to his new apartment. His ID said he was

eighteen, at the minimum age to rent a place. When Virgil lived in Milan, the minimum was sixteen. That was one of the few thing the Lanners got right.

After unpacking in the pre-furnished apartment and thanking his lucky stars he didn't have to find furniture, Virgil went shopping. He returned with groceries and a pack of dark blue sun contacts. After Virgil explained to the pharmacist that he planned to stay long term, the pharmacist recommended wearing sun contacts at first then tapering off to let himself get used to it. The blue ones went with his dark blue eyes and wouldn't be as conspicuous as black ones would be.

Wearing his sun contacts the next day, Virgil walked uphill to his new job, another hologame rental shop. He talked with his new boss for the first time in person and was surprised at how fast he signed. His new boss said he would get used to it. "You country people sign so slow!" he signed and laughed.

Virgil smirked. "I will become fast, I will. Watch!"

But he didn't get faster. People signed Ameslan here at what they called "Laurent speed," which was faster than fast, and Virgil wasn't on the fast end yet. At first, he got gentle good-natured ribbing from his customers. Then the ribbing became mean-spirited. Virgil swore to himself that he'd try harder. As more people got angry at him, the effort got harder to come by.

He got spat at, called a "worthless moocher," or a non-native Clerker who snuck into the country on their parentage, which was what Virgil had pretended to do to get in. But it wasn't that bad compared to what happened after he got caught in his worst habit.

Since he was little, he'd had a habit of singing to himself. When he was seven and becoming deafer by the day, his mother told him that she missed his singing. She said that she did that too and that's where her Gil got it from. After she added that she missed his little voice, Virgil continued singing to please her. He was so innocent back then, believing his parents would always love him and they wouldn't throw him out for any of his wrongs. Even after leaving home, the old habit persisted. If he was around deaf people, he was careful to only hum. He'd seen what happened to deaf people who opened their mouth to talk in countries other than Milan and Q.

But here in his paradise, Virgil became careless. He still sang to himself, trying to remember the sounds of his childhood while he cleaned or worked around the shop. When customers were around, Virgil turned his singing off. When it was slow and practically nobody was in, Virgil would sing childhood lullabies.

One day, it was raining hard outside and Virgil was alone in the shop. He was singing out loud, "And here comes the doom! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Pretty red poppies, in the air, soon hover... All over here, Vantas' blood is the cover..." He loved this particular nonsensical childhood song.

As he was singing about Vantas again, he felt vibrations echoing through his feet via the wooden floor. Virgil looked up, closing his mouth mid-word. A group of boys, rain-soaked to the skin, were staring at him, frozen to the spot. Virgil put away the mop and signed, "What's-up?" Clerkers used *what's-up* to ask what was happening instead of *what's happening* like most others did.

The group stared. Then one signed, "You... hear?" The sign he used for *hear* had a negative connotation.

Virgil frowned. "Hell no. Me deaf, same as all-you."

"So why you mouth-flapping?"

...shit. Virgil had to think fast. "Me training my jaws so I can eat all-you. Nom-nom!" He lifted his lip in a snarl and reached out his hands as opening and closing jaws towards the boys and they shied away, smiling. He helped them find a game and they left. Virgil thought he was off the hook.

Despite his quick thinking, Virgil had more trouble. He was watchful now for customers coming in, and he restricted himself to humming. No more singing! About a week after the boys came in, a group of thugs, all around Virgil's age, came in at a time when the shop was almost empty. One grabbed Virgil by the front of his red work shirt and signed, exhaling beer and cigarette stench into Virgil's face, "You mouthflapper!"

"No, me not!"

"Yes, you! My little brother saw-you!"

"Your little brother lies!"

The thug hauled Virgil over the counter and threw him to the floor. Virgil jumped up and slid into a defensive position and signed, "Don't fight me. Me ready."

The thug grinned. He reared back, ready to catch Virgil in the jaw. But Virgil's foot caught him in the solar plexus first. The thug was sent staggering backwards into his buddies.

He moved forward, ready to attack again. Virgil aimed for his nose with a quick but hard blow. It connected squarely with the thug's nose. They both felt crunching at the point of connection.

The thug staggered back. Blood gushed from his nose. One corner of his lip lifted. Before Virgil could react, the thug grabbed Virgil's dark curly hair and punched him hard in the cheek, causing a bruise to bloom under his left eye. After a headlock, a few more punches were thrown, including one that split the skin over his cheekbone. Virgil jabbed out an elbow, catching the thug in the stomach. While the thug was off-balance, Virgil hooked a foot around the thug's heel and pulled it back, making the thug fall over.

Virgil rubbed the new bruise on his cheek and then signed, "Get out. If you come back, then I call cops over-here."

The thugs swarmed out of the shop. Virgil looked at the blood on the floor. More mopping to do... his work was never done. He finished cleaning up the blood. Then he ducked into the bathroom to clean up, bandage his cheek and check the damage done.

As he applied a butterfly bandage to the split, Virgil gave his reflection a critical look. He'd come out of this fine. No new scars to add to the three nestled in his eyebrows or the many scattered on his face and body. The bruises, which would soon fade, could be explained by a story involving some random mugger. His jaw hurt where it was hit. For now, he was fine.

He may have looked fine, but his boss didn't think so. The next day, Virgil was summoned for a quick meeting in his boss' office, where he was told that he'd received a

few complaints against him. "Behave!" his boss told him. "Don't mess with our customers!"

Virgil signed that he wouldn't. The complaints against him rose anyway, thanks to the thug whose ass he'd kicked telling other people. Two weeks later, Virgil was fired.

Back in his apartment, Virgil packed up everything as fast as he could. He knew trouble would rise up somehow. At least it wasn't over a girl this time. Good thing Royal gave him a few spares. He still had two identity packs left, so he could use one of those.

Virgil found his electric razor and mirror. He shaved his head to get rid of his curly hair, with its distinctive profile. If he grew out his beard too, it'd hide his face and bruises better too.

Working on the papers for his car, he changed all instances of "Virgil Garrett" to "Nathan McLean" to go with his new identity.

He went through the identity cards, swapping them out where needed. Now that he was all clear and that all of his money was in a safe place, Virgil packed up his car and left.

The hologame rental shop was in a less-fortunate, hillier part of town. He went to the busiest, richest and flattest part of Laurent, where Clerc's government was located. Royal told him that the McLean identity was taken from someone who had government clearance, but didn't need it anymore. The man to find was Keith Yard, someone who would vaguely know the name but not remember the face.

After parking in a city garage, Virgil changed into nice clothes. This was his Plan B in case things went awry. He told Royal that he hated having to move around so much when things got crazy and Royal hooked him up with a few different identities.

As he memorized McLean's details, Virgil privately thanked Royal for this. He was happy to stay here, but not when people disliked him. He found Yard's office and peeked through the glass window on the door.

An old man, one of Clerc's senators, was working on something on his screen. Virgil waved, but the senator was too absorbed in his work to see. So he pressed the doorbell instead. A light blinked in the senator's office, and he looked up, signing, "Come in!" Virgil pushed open the door and entered, sitting across from him.

Virgil signed, "Hello, Senator Keith!" He still remembered the senator's unique sign name that Royal taught him.

As expected, the senator beamed. "Ah, should I know you?"

Virgil paused to remember the unique sign name for his false first name and the sign name for his false surname. "I'm Nathan McLean. We met before." Virgil held out his hand for a handshake, and the senator took it in a friendly gesture.

"Ah, I think I remember you. You work here last summer?"

"Yes." Royal had told him the dates of McLean's employment here.

"And you've come back!"

Virgil shrugged, smiling. "I couldn't stay away."

The senator offered him a new job working in his department. It was a standard information monkey job, but it would keep Virgil employed. If he kept his mouth shut, he'd be fine.

They went over the paperwork, and Nathan McLean was in. After they finished and hugged, Virgil went back to his car. He had a new apartment to find.

"How old're you?" one of the female employees asked him. They were in the cafeteria on Virgil's first day of work.

Virgil, his beard growing out now, answered with a lie: "Eighteen."
Alyssa smiled, hiding it behind her hand. "You look age twenty-five!" she signed, her hands jumping around everywhere as she rambled.

He decided to go with her. It was always so much fun to flirt with women and give them a good time.

As the lunch hour came to a close, she invited him to a party that Friday. He accepted and asked for details. She told him it'd be semi-formal and that she'd pick him up. Fair enough. His car's anti-grav floaters were breaking down anyway.

The work wasn't half bad either. Along with tracking down information, Virgil ran a lot of errands for Keith. Sometimes this meant running from office to office to find someone. Keith preferred communicating this way, thinking it was more personal than the videophone.

Through those errands and signed conversations, Virgil found out a lot more about the inner workings of Clerc in a short time. He had the basics down by the time he went with Alyssa to a party, which was good for conversations with higher-up guys there.

At one point during the party, Alyssa signed to him, keeping her hands low, "President must be here. Rumor says."

"He usually attend parties?" Virgil signed back, also keeping his hands low.

Alyssa shook her head. "If you recognize him, then don't sign so." She disappeared back into the crowd, leaving Virgil to deal with the others. She always did that, going off to talk to someone she knew or to hug someone who recently arrived. They liked their hugging a lot more here, compared to other countries.

He saw a few other Clerker celebrities at the party. One of them, an artist, struck up a conversation with him, talking about some new sculpture he'd been commissioned to make and Virgil asked him questions about it. It was always cool to listen to people talk about their craft.

The artist asked Virgil if he was interested in becoming an artist himself. Virgil said no thanks, he sucked at drawing. The artist laughed and moved on to someone else.

A senator tapped Virgil on the shoulder. When Virgil turned around, he launched into a spiel about his plans. Apparently, he wanted to build a new city council building and name it after himself, since he did so much. "They owe me!" he signed, his teeth gritted. "I must build this fast. They appreciate that more!"

Virgil remembered his brief experience with construction during his travels. "Building fast not good. What if something mess up?"

The senator waved his hands. "No! It will be perfect!" He rambled some more before Virgil found an excuse and ducked out.

He looked around for Alyssa after getting a glass of wine. Technically, he shouldn't be able to get this, since the drinking age was twenty. But they didn't care. From his view near the bar, he could see a senator drunkenly hitting on a young assistant and a few others talking with muddled signing.

Virgil continued to wander around, still looking for Alyssa. When he found her making out with another guy, he knew the party was over for him. He still had to help her get back home, since she was his ride here. But she looked awfully busy, so he'd go check on her later.

He wandered around until he bumped into a tall, stout man who signed, "Sorry!"

Virgil signed, smiling, "Fine."

"Your name's what?"

"Nathan McLean. Keith my boss." Virgil looked around the party, hoping to find Keith, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The man nodded. "Good man. Where you from?"

"Hotchkiss." It was the only other town he was familiar with. Wow, that was unusual for his travels.

"Good place!" The man asked Virgil about a few restaurants there.

By a stroke of luck, Virgil knew those places, so he was able to chat about them.

Then the man invited Virgil to sit with him at the bar. The man ordered drinks for himself and Virgil, and Virgil pretended to drink. They discussed the government system for Clerc, with Virgil struggling with a basic grasp of politics and the man explaining everything.

It was the senators who ran everything, and Keith was high up on the ladder of Clerc politics. The president, as the man revealed himself to be, was a mere figurehead. His public image was of a man who was too busy with running his country to be seen. In reality, he didn't have to do much. "Very excellent job," the president told Virgil. "I relax all I want. Will you work for me, McLean?"

The president seemed a little drunk by now. But it did seem intriguing, Virgil had to admit. He signed, "How much pay?"

"Better than what Keith's paying."

"What do I do?"

The president told him: as an aide, "Nathan" would accompany the president everywhere and act as a spokesperson if needed. In reality, he would follow the president on his frequent vacations and sign with people from other countries if needed. "Do you know other languages?"

Virgil signed in English, "I know English." He demonstrated his ability in other signed languages as well..

The president beamed. "Great! You help much!"

They talked for a while longer. Then Virgil excused himself to find Alyssa. He found her, curled up on the floor, and had to drag her out to her car.

After dropping her off in her apartment, Virgil walked home to his own place, which wasn't far, and fell asleep.

The next morning, Virgil checked his videophone since the light was flashing in the pattern indicating answering machine messages. There was a message from the

president. He told Virgil to come to his office today instead of Keith's, then gave directions.

After Virgil arrived, he went through the mazelike corridors, searching for the president's office. When he stopped in front of a plain black door, so unlike the other ornately decorated ones on the corridor, he checked to make sure the number was correct. Then he pressed the doorbell.

The president let him in. He smiled and signed, "Hello Nathan. How are you?"

Virgil smiled back. "Fine."

The president told him to sit down. Then they went over what "Nathan" would be doing while working for the president. The job would require them to travel a lot, which Virgil was very happy with. Virgil would also use his knowledge of different languages in Americana to help the president communicate with others. There was Universal Sign, but not everyone used it.

For the next three months, Virgil was happy. He got to travel for a living and he was out of Clerc for long periods of time. But something still felt wrong, and he couldn't figure out why.

In a long conversation with the president while they were lying on an England beach one autumn afternoon, Virgil asked him more about Clerc and how it was run. He listened in fascination as the president told him about how corrupted Clerc was and stories of what higher-ups did. "But people, they don't notice," the president told Virgil. "They think things're going fine."

When they returned to Clerc, Virgil's request for a week off was granted. He took a very long road trip around the country by car. His wandering itch had gotten worse since his long trip with the president.

During his wanderings through the Lachian Mountains and some rural parts of Clerc, he observed Clerkers out in the wild. He occasionally got out and interacted with them, working for money, but otherwise he kept his distance. At one point, he spent a few days camping in the woods. That gave him the most peace he'd felt in a while, but it was right before he saw some of the worst injustices in that area.

Near the end of his trip, at one point, he put his car's auto-driving system on pause and then got out when he saw a group of boys surrounding a much younger boy. They were circled around him, taunting him if he dared move his hands. From what Virgil could tell, the younger boy had a different style of signing compared to the older boys, one that didn't move that smoothly. For this difference, they were mocking him.

Virgil tapped one of the boys on the shoulder and everyone in the circle stared at him.

In his best Ameslan, Virgil signed, "Stop. You pick on him, why?"

The boys looked at each other. The boldest one signed, "He signs stupid," and added a flapping, slack-jawed imitation.

"You should know better." To the younger boy, he signed, "Come on."

The younger boy got up from the center and followed him. Near his car, Virgil signed with the younger boy and found that this boy, named Matt, was picked on all the

time for his style of signing. Virgil asked if this kind of thing was common and Matt said it was.

Virgil remembered various other scenes of bullying he saw in his travels. Once in Pegasus, he saw a Lanner boy have his hearing aids torn out and thrown to the ground by a group of Gasser boys, who then stomped on the hearing aids, breaking them. In Epee, he had seen a group of Epais girls beat up a younger foreign girl. This kind of shit happened even in paradise. Virgil signed with Matt for a while longer and gave him a ride home.

That night in his motel room, Virgil paced, thinking. This place was supposed to be the best place on Eyeth. It was supposed to be the pinnacle, the very best of Deaf civilization. Yet it was no better than any other place. It was as corrupt and messed up as any other country on Eyeth.

He found a pen and some paper in his bags and started writing out some thoughts. Rambling in his native Gallian English, he wrote about how Clerc was corrupt and messed up and how it should be improved. Virgil grabbed a fresh piece of paper and, keeping a structure in mind, wrote out his plan for how he would improve this stinking cesspool of a country.

The next day, he saw a café that had a row of laser displays shining from their metal-boxed computers and a printer. Virgil consulted the notes he had, bought a coffee to legitimize his being there and typed out his notes. After revising them into a letter and printing it out, he threw out the coffee. They would kick him out if he didn't buy anything.

The letter was stuffed into an envelope. Virgil drove back to Laurent on a late autumn day and dropped off the envelope in the government's mail box, which was in a location only known to employees. This location would ensure that his letter got seen and read. Maybe then they would do something for once. Then he drove away, abandoning his car somewhere on the border of Keller. The only thing he took from the car was his camping backpack full of his worldly possessions.

Three months short of his eighteenth birthday, Virgil G was forced to leave paradise on Eyeth. He wandered, still looking for that one place he belonged.

"You find it?"

"Where?"

"The place where you belonged."

A shake of the head. Then: "I don't know. Maybe I did when you found me."

Chapter XVI: Reflections, V

"See? Clerc is still messed up," Virgil signed.

"No, Clerc is good." Shawn went on to speak of a visit he made in his twenties to Whitetown, a small tightknit community in rural Clerc.

One family, the Powers, were very supportive of the Great War. Mr. Power spoke fondly of his ancestors, telling the young Guardian, "My family's been deaf for many, many generations. We want this world to stay deaf like us."

The Guardian signed, "Why like you?"

"We are champ!" Mr. Power spread his arms and looked around. "Look at this beautiful land! We all worked hard and earned our right to live here! Most successful people on Eyeth, who? Us! Clerc was the most united. You know that we had the first government here? Everyone else, they were a mess. But we organized! We're fighting hard! My sons, they fight so hard... but one, himself brave, fought hard to the end." He sat down, wiping away a tear.

He then told the Guardian about his family's sacrifice for the war. The Powers' sons, Russell and Tyrone, enlisted as soon as they could. Russell excelled, rising to become a well-known non-commissioned officer who was respected by those under his limited command. His younger brother stayed in the enlisted ranks and fought bravely for his country. He was killed in the line of duty while on a daring mission.

Russell was the first to sight-hear of his brother's death. Upset, he asked for a leave of absence so he could mourn. By the time he returned home, his mother was planning his brother's funeral. Russell attended the funeral and his family meals with the same

blank expression. When a representative from the army, one of Russell's comrades, came, Russell refused to go. He insisted that he would stay with Tyrone. The representative reported back to Russell's commander. The military decided to give him another month. If Russell refused again, they would have to dishonorably discharge him.

They were very concerned about their son, as Mr. Power told the Guardian. But neither parent could do anything about Russell's apathy, so they left him alone. Hopefully, he would recover from the shock of Tyrone's death.

Every morning, Russell sat in his room, staring out the window. Every afternoon, he took long walks, aiming his thousand-yard stare on everything and nothing. Every evening, he sat with his blank expression on as his mother knitted and his father watched the news. Once in a while, Russell would look up to catch a few signs on the three-dimensional screen, but otherwise he stared at nothing.

Two weeks passed. One morning, a young woman came. When Mrs. Power greeted her, she signed, "What's-up?"

"I sight-heard about Tyrone. I wanted inform-you, what, I'm sorry," the young woman signed, using polite flairs. "About Russell... I talk-him, please?"

Mrs. Power let her in, thinking that Russell would turn her away as usual, as he had with all the other visitors. But the young woman went upstairs and she wasn't hurried out after ten minutes, much to Mrs. Power's surprise.

She went upstairs and peeked through the crack of the door to her sons' room. The young woman was signing, quite animatedly, and Russell was looking at her with that blank expression on his face.

Then the young woman left the room. On seeing Mrs. Power, she signed, "More people will come-here today."

"People coming? Why?"

"We thought, what, Russell needs chatting-us."

"He doesn't like visitors coming-here."

"He needs visitors." The young woman smiled and left.

Mrs. Power stared after her, baffled. Some neighbors and friends had left casseroles and other food around the time of Tyrone's funeral. Nobody thought about Russell at all.

More people came into the house that day to talk to Russell. Some stayed ten minutes, but others stayed for an hour.

At the end of the day, Mrs. Power caught the last visitor and asked him, "What you discussing with him?"

"I discussed, what, his brother," the visitor, a young man Tyrone's age, signed to her. "I knew him in school. Everybody discussed Tyrone."

The next day, more visitors came. They all discussed Tyrone with him. That evening, Mrs. Buster from the bakery came to see the Powers. She sat down on their couch. Russell was sitting in the armchair with his blank expression on as always.

Mrs. Buster signed, "I think you-all wonder why people are coming, chatting with Russell."

"Yes," Mrs. Power signed. "What's-up?"

"Every-day during last two-weeks, I saw Russell walk-by my bakery. I remember when he was small. He always signed hello, chatted with me. During last two-weeks, he didn't wave, looking very sad. I know-that he misses his brother. I decided to do, what, help-him." Mrs. Buster went on to sign that she gathered up most everybody in the town and told them to go there and talk to him about his brother. By facing the issue of his brother, Mrs. Buster thought, Russell would go back to his old self.

Mr. Power signed, "But you didn't have to. Russell could have recovered himself."

"I saw a problem. We wanted to help. More people will come tomorrow." She stood up and walked over to Russell. She clasped his hands in her own before letting go and signing, "I hope you'll sign hello again."

Sure enough, the next day, more of Russell's and Tyrone's friends came by to talk to Russell about his brother. Some of their teachers even came by as well. On the fourth day, some of Russell's army friends, who were on leave, came to visit and talk with Russell. When Mrs. Power eavesdropped on their conversations, she saw that they were talking about the army life and how it was good. They were persuading him to return, and it was starting to work.

A week after the first visitor came, Russell came downstairs, a smile on his face. He told his parents, "I'll be right back, Mom, Dad. Some of my old friends, they invited me to do what? Go see a movie."

"Have fun!" his mother told him, so grateful to see a smile on Russell's face.

Russell went out every day that week. At the end of the week, he put on his army dress uniform so he was ready to leave when the army representative showed up.

"Okay, so a town helps out a grieving soldier," Virgil signed. "And?"

"And?" Shawn repeated. "This is a Clerker town. Russell was dealing with the shock of his brother's death, and they encouraged him to go back, help his country."

"Russell Power… that name's familiar. I think I saw it in a book once." Virgil remembered the book: a Laurent edition with a red-and-black cover, published after the war. Thousands of names were listed in that "honor book". Seventeen-year-old Virgil thought it was weird that someone who had so many medals was listed near the back of the book, in the black "dishonorable" section. Russell's brother Tyrone was also listed, but he was in the red "honorable" section. Virgil now understood the difference. The honorable ones died by an enemy's hand while the dishonorable ones died by their own hand. Odd, how the brothers were separated. "His father told you what happened to him?"

"His father told me that Russell went straight to desk duty. He didn't go back to the front for several months."

And he was still listed in that book. "Should his town have helped?"

"Why not?"

"Russell had war shock and the death of his brother pushed him into depression. They shouldn't have pushed him back into war."

"That's what I signed, long ago. I thought Russell didn't want to go back, but his father said it was best for Clerc."

"How sad. Russell gave-up himself for his country."

"Some would sign that's good." Shawn paused, looking at Virgil. "You see? Clerc means well."

Virgil thought about it. If Russell had been honorably discharged, he would still have had war on his mind. Russell was only in that book because of what he had done before Tyrone's death. If he was an ordinary enlisted soldier, he wouldn't have been listed there.

"Evil can be good," Shawn signed.

"I don't know."

Resting his chin in his hand, Shawn looked at the young man who had told him that he had no purpose. "Why are you here on Eyeth?"

"Why are you?" Virgil retorted. "Aren't you from Old Earth?"

"I almost died there when I was small. What do you know about Old Earth?"

"That it's the 'Origin Planet,'" Virgil signed with a shrug. "My father told me that his family was from, where, a place called New York. They lived in some city called Rochester. What's so special about that crowded, stinking planet?"

"I will let you think. We meet tomorrow at midday in the courtyard."

Virgil kept tossing and turning all night, the stories of that day echoing in his head. He wanted to know what was up with Shawn, once and for all. He was getting what he wanted at last. But he was scared. He didn't know why.

After waking up at some ungodly hour, Virgil killed time all morning by reading. He found some books talking about Old Earth. Apparently, colonizing was made a priority when overpopulation became a serious problem, with top scientists working

around the clock to make it happen. The first colony, called H. T. Rae, was designed to accommodate those with special needs. After those people were put away, more planets were found and colonized.

Those special needs people, including deaf people, were told that they could never contact their families again. Their families were also told that their loved ones were killed instead of being taken away to a planet in order to discourage communication. After reading that part, Virgil threw the book at the wall.

He kept himself busy with some fiction books until a quarter to midday. Then he took off for the courtyard.

Shawn was already there, sitting cross-legged on one of the benches. When he saw Virgil, he signed, "What do you know about Old Earth?"

"They kicked us out because of our 'special needs,'" Virgil signed, his teeth gritted. "Why? What's wrong with us?"

"Nothing. You said your family was from New York?"

"My father said, yes. What about that place?"

"I'm from a place called, what, Maryland. My father died, when, before I was born. My mother married again when I was a baby. Her new husband didn't like that three of his four stepchildren couldn't hear. So he gave away my sisters and me to, where, a church near Baltimore. My older brother was spoiled while my sisters and I got, what, nothing. I remember my sisters always gave me their food, why, they wanted me to grow-big." Shawn's sign for *grow-big* was so archaic it seemed childish. "Come."

Virgil followed Shawn from the courtyard back to the palace's library. Shawn pulled down a thick black book with a cross engraved on the cover. After laying the book down on a table, he opened it to a page with the word "GOSPEL OF LUKE" at the top, flipped forward some pages, and then read, his signs tilting English, "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back."

"What's that?"

"This is what? A Bible. It's much older than me. J--- read some of this to me when I was with him. When I became older, I read the rest." Shawn looked at the page with the verse on it again. "Do you know what this-verse means?" With the sign for *this-verse*, his fingers moved over the verse he'd just signed out.

Virgil looked at the verse. "That means… be nice to everyone without expecting them to give-you something?"

"Correct. Doesn't matter if they can hear or not or if they have something for you. You should be nice to them like anyone else. That was what J--- believed."

"Your father?"

"Yes, my adoptive father. Old Earth was a difficult place for me when I was small, but he helped me leave. It was a messed-up place, but he gave-me hope. Afterwards, he went to prison, then had a hard life and died almost alone. Let me tell you of a burning church basement…"

Chapter XVII: Hero, Father.

The night of the burning church started out ordinary. For Jason Wright, a tall young man in his late twenties, it was supposed to be an evening shift full of nothing but card games.

Adam, one of the older guys there, shuffled the cards with his thick fingers. As he dealt the cards, he said, "In the old days, we had volunteer firefighters in some places. We didn't have all this government regulation like nowadays."

One of the younger guys, who had spiky red hair, scoffed. "Who'd risk their lives for nothing? I like working under Uncle Sam a lot better, that's for sure!" Other younger guys laughed at this remark.

Jason shrugged. "I wouldn't mind working as a volunteer. I'd be serving my community and that's what's important."

The red-haired firefighter rolled his eyes, as did a few others. The older guys nodded at Jason and one gave the younger firefighters a dirty look. "This is a man who knows how to serve."

"Nationalism is out, Grandpa," one told him. "Globalism is in."

Jason wore a small smile as he looked at his cards. He got along much better with the older men here. He had learned old-fashioned values from his grandparents, who taught him to cherish their values and love.

The men were on the last round in their poker game when the alarm blared. They threw their cards face-down, and jumped into their federally-issued reflective bright orange uniforms. The amount of soot on their uniforms showed their years of service.

The fire truck rushed through downtown streets. A pastor had gone to check on his church and called the station when he saw smoke pouring from the basement. Upon arrival, the fire was spreading much faster than initially reported: it was now a true fire, and flames licked up through the bottom rafters. It was possible for the fire to spread to the rest of the church at this point.

Some of the guys hooked up the hoses. Jason and his partner, Patrick, had to check for people in danger. Patrick took one side of the basement while Jason took the other.

After his protective gear was secured, Jason rushed in. As soon as he opened the door, he heard a faint cry. He followed the source of the sound to a locked door. Jason broke the lock open with his hand ax and kicked the heavy door open.

He noticed the cribs and toys on the floor first. Then he noticed that there were three children in this room, two of their bodies lying on the floor. Those two kids had been dead for a while. But the third child, a little boy, was standing there, crying. He was moving and twisting his hand away from himself, over and over. Since the other kids were dead, Jason only had to report those when he got out. He took the little boy by the shoulders, knelt down and told him, "Hey, I'm here to save you. Come on."

The little boy, who was no more than five, instinctively grabbed Jason around the neck, clinging to him. Jason lifted him up and hurried out of the nursery.

The basement was now a roaring inferno. Jason kept his mind on the right route when there was a loud crashing noise and the fire blazed brighter. Jason kept going, holding the kid tight. Up ahead, he saw one of the beams fall down. It looked like a structural beam. Crap.

Jason found an alternate route around the fallen beam. Navigation took longer than expected on the new hairpin route. Once, he heard a cracking sound, but he kept going. This fire was getting worse, and he had a life to save.

The cracking sounds increased both in number and volume, and all he could do was focus on getting out. The little boy, looking over his shoulder, cried out, and Jason, out of instinct, turned to see what the child was looking at.

A structural beam, now transformed to fire, came loose from the ceiling. Jason turned right back and hurried for the door. He couldn't afford to be in here if that thing fell.

The exit, a mercy from God, appeared amidst the flames. Some of the guys from the station had put out the flames around the exit, and it was this sanctuary that Jason rushed to. They grabbed at him when they saw him. "Hey, you got out fine!" "...is that a kid?" "Is he okay?" "Come on, let's get him to protective services!" "Jase, you okay?"

Jason shook his head to clear it. He was standing in the field outside the church now. The efforts to put out the fire were still ongoing and starting to succeed, but Jason knew that too much damage was done. He said, "I'm okay. How's the kid?"

"Protective services have him," Patrick said. "I think he'll be fine. You wanna talk to 'em?"

"I need to tell them about what I saw. Who can I talk to?"

Patrick pointed to a cop standing with some people from Child Protective Services. Jason thanked him and hurried over to the cop, who was chatting with the CPS officials about the kid.

One of the officials was saying, "...it's strange. Why did they burn the church with a kid in there?"

The cop shrugged. "One of those firefighter guys told me it might have been arson. I don't know why." Then he saw Jason and stopped talking.

"Excuse me!" Jason said. "I'm the guy who got that kid out safe. I need to tell you what I saw."

The cop tweaked one end of his brown mustache and said, "Is it important?"

"I saw dead kids in there."

The cop produced a pad of paper and a pen. "What did you see?" The CPS people stared at Jason.

Jason described the locked nursery and the two dead children, both girls from his best guess.

An official from CPS spoke up. "The boy appears to be malnourished."

The cop nodded gravely. "We'll need to investigate. Thank you."

Jason asked the official, "Is there any way I can get in touch with the kid later on? I'd like to see how he's doing."

"We'll get in touch with you later. What's your name?"

Jason gave his name, was thanked, and went back. He was asked about what he saw in the basement. He described the beams falling, but he didn't describe the nursery. They only needed to know about the structural damage so they could know if the damage was repairable or not.

After it was all over, they went back to the station, laughing and bantering the whole way. But Jason was quieter than usual. His mind was still on the boy he saved. Why were the kids there in the first place? Who were they?

A month after the fire in the church incident, Jason walked into the station and saw Adam at one of the tables, his head cradled in his hands. Jason touched Adam's shoulder. "What's going on?"

Adam looked up, wiping away some tears, and said, "I got a call from Monty. He said he had to give up Robbie."

"Give up? What do you mean?" Jason had never heard of this kind of thing happening.

"There's an international law that says if a person is broken, they have to be taken away and destroyed." Adam's voice was near the breaking point now.

"How was your grandson broken?" Jason had heard of a similar law for infants, but not for children or adults.

"He was losing his hearing." Adam looked down at the table.

"That can happen?" Jason was shocked. Technology had advanced so much near the end of the century that birth defects could now be prevented for most people.

"Monty kept saying that he could help Robbie, that we could fix him up somehow. We knew his hearing was going, but we didn't want to give him up. Monty was teaching him some hand language too."

"Hand language?"

"It's a language for people who can't hear. Monty found an old book somewhere in Washington with those gestures matching words. Robbie learned a lot then he got taken away."

"Jesus, Adam, I'm sorry."

Adam shook his head. "It's hell, that law. It's taken away too many people, but we need it. Oh yeah…! Jason, you got a call from Child Protective Services today."

"Did they leave a number?"

Adam gave him a strip of paper with the number written down on it. Jason grabbed it, put his glasses on and, with one eye looking at the paper, dialed on a keyboard only he could see. He pulled out his mike cord to hang level with his mouth, tilted his head forward and waited.

"Hello?" he said over his glasses' phone function after the other end had picked up. "Is this Child Protective Services? This is Jason Wright."

"Hello, Mr. Wright," a female voice said, vibrating the ends of his glasses' arms. "You requested that we keep you updated on a boy you rescued."

"What's up?"

"We're having a hard time connecting with him. We think that he'll only respond to his rescuer. Could you please come here soon?"

"Today?"

"If possible."

Jason pinched his mike cord, muting it, and said to Adam, "Can I have the day off?"

Adam nodded. "Go on."

Jason took his fingers off the mike and said, "All right, I'll be by this afternoon."

After lunch, he walked over to the government building, not far from his station downtown. He found CPS on the third floor of this building.

The reception room reminded Jason of a family doctor's waiting room, with toys in one corner and couches. A few minutes later, his name was called and Jason turned to recognize a woman from the day of the church fire.

She said, "Mr. Wright? We require your assistance with the boy you rescued."

Jason got up. "Where is he? Did you find what his name is?"

"We don't have a name yet. Follow me this way, please."

He followed her to a room. The boy was sitting in the corner, playing with some toys. He'd been cleaned up, and now his hair looked golden blond and not light brown. The boy had also been better fed as well. But he still had the same unhappy look in his green eyes.

Jason turned to the woman. "What do I do? I've played with my nephews before, but that's all the experience I have with kids."

She smiled. "Then play with him, Mr. Wright. Get him to open up." Then she turned and left Jason alone with the boy.

Jason watched the boy play. The boy seemed most fascinated with the vehicles. Jason remembered hearing a toy fire truck before coming into the room.

The boy had his hand on one particular part of the truck, Jason now noticed. His fingers were over the speaker part of the truck, where the sounds came from. Jason took

an ambulance toy and turned it on, putting his hand on the speaker part like the boy was doing. Sure enough, he could feel the sound there.

Jason looked at the boy and noticed that the boy was staring at him. Then the boy pointed at Jason, then pointed at his ear and mouth, then moved his hand back and forth with only the pinky and thumb out.

Why would the boy do that? Unless… Adam had talked about that hand language book. If this was hand language, then Jason needed that book. He didn't know for sure if this kid's ears were broken. But they were trying to get him to communicate. They wouldn't do any tests on him until they were sure that he wasn't mentally retarded. They didn't know about his gestures or thought they didn't mean anything. Jason was their last resort for making this boy communicate. They would be desperate. They would give him more time to get this boy to open up. If Jason could get that book from Adam's son, maybe he could figure out what this boy was saying. Maybe Jason could get a name out of him.

Jason looked at the boy. The boy was giving him a hopeful look. Jason pointed at his ear and then himself and nodded, trying to show he could hear. The boy's face lit up and his hands went into a flurry of movements.

Crap! Jason put his hands over the boy's, and shook his head. The boy looked disappointed.

The boy looked like he was old enough to be learning how to write. Jason saw some paper and a pen on a small table.

Then he hunkered down next to the boy and held out the paper and pen. The boy looked puzzled. Jason gestured writing with the pen. The boy took the paper and pen and went over to the small table.

Jason watched while the boy laboriously wrote out something. After he was finished, the boy held out the paper to Jason. It read in his childish scrawl, "ME SHAWN. ME 5."

Jason took the paper and pointed to more paper. He said, in a louder voice so that the boy could maybe hear him, "Hey, can you write anything else? Can you write more?"

The boy, apparently named Shawn, studied his face while Jason spoke. Shawn took the paper and pen again and scrawled something, a childish scribble, a mere drawing. Then he looked at Jason, hopeful.

So he had limited writing skills. It was a small breakthrough, but the writing was something he could show the CPS people.

Jason smiled at Shawn and said in a raised voice, "I'll help you." Shawn seemed to understand, because he gestured something that involved pointing at Jason then another gesture that went towards himself. Jason, not sure what it meant, nodded and smiled again. Then he held out his hand, and Shawn grabbed it, a wide grin on his face.

They left the room, with Jason holding Shawn's paper in one hand and Shawn's hand in the other. When the woman saw them, she asked Jason, "Did you get something out of him?"

Jason showed her the paper. "I think he's shy. Is it okay if he stays with me? If he gets more comfortable around me, maybe I can get more information out of him."

The woman pursed her lips. "I don't know if you'd be a suitable foster parent… we would need to send someone to investigate first."

"When will that be?"

"Soon. You'll know when we contact you, Mr. Wright."

"All right, thank you." Then Jason knelt so that Shawn could see him. In a raised voice, Jason said, "Sorry, buddy. I can't help you yet. Hang on, all right? Gimme five." Jason held up his hand and Shawn high-fived him, smiling.

The woman looked surprised. "You better qualify, Mr. Wright."

"I hope I do." He got up, waved good-bye to Shawn, then he left. He walked back to the station.

Things were still slow. Some of the older guys were sitting around reading newspapers or napping and the younger guys had gone out somewhere. Jason called up his friend Marta, a social worker. When she picked up, he asked, "What do you need to be a foster parent?"

"Already in the market for kids?" she joshed on the other end. "I thought you didn't want them…"

Jason gritted his teeth. As an ex-girlfriend, Marta would pick on him about that. "There's a situation. No, I didn't knock anyone up. I just need to know what you need to be a foster parent."

"You need a good income and space for your foster child. Seriously, Jase, what came up?"

"Thanks for helping."

"Okay, no problem! Can I meet the kid after you're in?"

"No." Jason hung up. Marta could be a terrible gossip and he didn't want her spreading crap about him.

Good income... as a federal employee, he had that. If some girl he'd knocked up by accident left a toddler on the doorstep to his apartment, he could provide for it. He also had a two-bedroom, from the days when he had a roommate. After his former roommate got a transfer to a colony a few weeks ago, he moved out, leaving an extra room to deal with. Jason had been thinking about moving to a one-bedroom when his lease ended, but now he needed that extra room.

What was in that extra room? Most of it was his former roommate's stuff and the rest was other stuff Jason wanted out of the way. He'd clean it out and make it that kid's room. Okay, he could keep Shawn. A few of the guys sometimes brought their kids to the station to hang out for the day, so there was that possibility.

Jason powered off the glasses and folded them before shoving them back into his pants pocket. Then he found Adam, who had a newspaper app open on his glasses. "Hey, does your son still have that hand language book?"

Adam looked over his glasses, frowning. "I think so. Why?"

"I want to look at it. That'd be okay, right? If I could borrow it?"

"He said he wanted to throw it out. It's an old curiosity. I'll tell him I have a friend who wants it."

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" Jason pumped a fist into the air.

Adam had to smile.

A week later, Jason was showing Shawn around his apartment. Jason had qualified to be a foster parent a few days prior and gotten Shawn today. The extra room had been cleaned up.

Jason had also looked at the book with hand language after getting it from Adam. Apparently, the gesture that Shawn had made by pointing to his ear and mouth meant deaf, which meant that Jason had inadvertently told Shawn he couldn't hear. Oops. He'd corrected Shawn, once he'd found the right gestures, along with a gesture that meant "sorry."

He also introduced himself to Shawn with a namesign. The book had a section on them, saying that only deaf people gave namesigns, but there were temporary ones hearing people could use by using some location on the body plus the first letter of their name. Jason picked a J flicking off the side of his head. Shawn needed to call him something that wasn't "Dad."

He'd picked up a few other gestures from the book and was now telling Shawn that this was his room and there was his bed. Shawn, clutching the fire truck from CPS, climbed onto the bed. He lay on it, then curled up, still clutching the fire truck. The woman from CPS had told Jason that Shawn refused to let go of the fire truck, so they let him keep it. He closed his green eyes, soon falling asleep. Poor kid had a long day.

Jason smiled back and said a quick prayer over him. That boy needed all the help he could get. Then he sat on the floor with the hand language book and looked at the different gestures. He could get through with this, Jason hoped. It was clear that Shawn could hear him if he raised his voice, and he could also kind of hear the fire truck. But

Shawn couldn't hear regular spoken voices or whispers. He had to wonder if Shawn could talk at all. He knew Shawn could make sound.

But there was a problem. CPS hadn't figured out yet that Shawn's ears were broken. They probably thought he came from an abusive situation. Those kinds of kids tended to stay mute for a while. Until he opened up, they couldn't do physical examinations on him. Once they tested his ears, Shawn would be taken away to his death like Robbie. Jason couldn't let that happen.

He was protecting this boy, first from burning to death in a locked room and now from being sent to his death. But how? He'd have to communicate to Shawn how to fake his way through an auditory test, and he wasn't sure how well Shawn could understand others. The woman at CPS said that Shawn refused to communicate, but it seemed like he was in shock. Being in the same room as two dead kids could do that to you. Had he known them?

Jason sat at the counter in his kitchen, making notes on what to do. He took out his glasses and thought about calling Marta.

No. Bad idea. What if she had Shawn taken away?

But she could be trusted to keep a secret, or so he remembered from his early days with her. He had to get her to warm up to him. And to do that, he'd have to let her see Shawn. That was a risk.

It was a risk he would have to take. Jason put on his glasses and dialed Marta. It was late now, but she should answer.

She did. "Hello?"

Jason worked it out with his boss that he could have a few days off to get things straightened out with Shawn, so he was sitting at home playing with him in the living room when the doorbell rang. Shawn's head didn't turn, but Jason told him he'd be right back. Shawn nodded and went back to playing with his fire truck and other vehicles.

Marta was there, at the door, wearing her cat smile, meaning she was up to no good. Jason let her in and she said, "So, where's this boy you talked about?"

Jason led her to the living room, then he waved at Shawn to get his attention. Then Jason said with a raised voice, "Shawn, my friend Marta is here. Why don't you say hi?"

Shawn looked over at Marta. His green eyes widened. He dropped everything he'd been playing with and fled, hiding behind an armchair.

Marta gave Jason a puzzled look, her cat smile vanishing. "What's wrong with him?"

Jason shrugged. "Shawn! Buddy, what's wrong?" He looked behind the armchair to see Shawn there, crouching as far away from Marta as he could. A faint growling noise emanated from Shawn's throat.

"Is he okay?" Marta had retreated to the kitchen now.

Jason rose and walked to where Marta was. "I'm sorry. I guess I should've waited to see how he handles other people. CPS said they couldn't get him to open up. Listen, go into my room and close the door. Don't touch anything in there. I'll calm the kid down."

Marta nodded and backed away, into Jason's room. After the door closed, Jason went over to the armchair and pulled it away from the wall so that Shawn was exposed.

He walked over and grabbed Shawn around the waist. Then Jason swung Shawn over his shoulder and carried him off.

After the door to Shawn's room was closed, Jason took the book with hand language out from under Shawn's bed and looked up the gestures he needed. Shawn crouched on his bed. At least he wasn't growling anymore.

Jason asked in gestures, "What's wrong?"

Shawn made two gestures that Jason translated as, "Woman bad."

After some more searching, Jason got out, "I need help from woman."

Shawn scowled.

"I will explain... tomorrow, OK? I not have all gestures now explain."

This was acceptable. Shawn turned his back to Jason.

Jason left the room and found Marta back in the kitchen. He told her, "He was freaked out by you. I'm sorry. I should have explained..."

Marta's lower lip poked out. "So what is wrong with him? He looks okay."

"When I first found him, he was locked up in a room with two dead kids. He also has something wrong with him. I don't want him to die. That means I saved him for nothing."

Marta rolled her eyes and shook her head. "So dramatic! Doesn't everybody die at some point? It won't matter. I'm sure it's not that bad, anyway. Maybe he was abused."

"It's not about his being abused. It's something else. I don't know if I can tell you..."

"Humph!" Marta tossed her head. "I suppose I will have to come back at a better time."

She left, closing his front door with a bang.

Jason sighed and went to go find the hand language book again. He had to explain some things to Shawn and find some things out too. It would take a lot of learning and patience.

He was so lost in the book that it took Shawn tugging on his sleeve and asking for food to pull him out of it.

Jason tiredly made a quick lunch, consisting of some grilled cheese. Shawn ate his sandwich and watched Jason working on the gestures.

When Jason looked up at one point, Shawn asked, "Why you not know gestures?"

"I speak, not gesture." Jason went back to the book. After a pounding on the table, he looked up again. "What?"

"Want me help?"

"Yes." Jason looked through the book for the right gestures. He said with his hands, "I ask you questions?"

Shawn cocked his head.

After a long and painful look through the book, Jason managed to ask Shawn about his time in the church. By now, he had found that Shawn didn't understand him when he used some gestures, so he learned to drop those.

Shawn said a bad man put him and his sisters there but not his brother. Jason asked why not his brother but Shawn wouldn't say. Shawn went on to say that the bad man was angry and hit Shawn and both of his sisters. This bad man would also beat his

oldest sister if she spoke wrong, so Shawn and his other sister never spoke at all. The bad man got so mad that he left them there with some food and water.

A lot of time passed, but the bad man never came back. His sisters forced Shawn to eat. His sisters said that Shawn should go on. His sisters stopped gesturing and were gone, and Shawn was here.

Jason asked Shawn about whom the bad man was and the only thing Shawn said was that he was with their mother. Jason could only guess that the man was Shawn's stepfather, since Shawn said nothing about a father.

Jason asked Shawn about his hearing. Shawn moved his index fingers away from his ears in a gesture that Jason didn't understand.

After more flipping through the book to find the right gestures, Jason explained that the woman, Marta, was supposed to help him. If Shawn didn't hear well enough for the big people (Shawn had called CPS big people), then he would be taken away to go away like his sisters. Jason had to make sure that Shawn would still be around. Jason also told Shawn that if it wasn't for Jason, then Shawn would have gone away in that church.

Shawn did understand Jason, despite Jason's clumsy gestures. He had the biggest smile on his face and he hugged Jason.

Jason had to smile back. Then he said in a raised voice, "Can you understand me if I talk like this?"

Shawn nodded and gestured, "But it's easy for me gesture. I not like speak."

The abuse was responsible for ending Shawn's voice, Jason knew now. But Shawn could still make noise. He cried in the church basement and he growled at Marta.

"Everyone speaks," Jason told Shawn in a raised voice. "So it'll be hard for you to live here."

Shawn nodded, his eyes downcast.

His three off days ended and Jason was back at work now. He'd asked his boss to let him take Shawn to work since he couldn't trust anyone now to take care of him. His boss allowed it with much reluctance, but said that if Shawn misbehaved, Jason would have to find a babysitter.

Jason told Shawn this and sternly told him to behave. Shawn nodded, eyes wide. So now Shawn came along with Jason to work.

The other guys at the station didn't mind Shawn. They saw him as their mascot and let him tag along on errands. Jason told them to make their voices louder so Shawn could understand them. They wouldn't understand his gestures, but that was all right since Shawn could ask Jason for help.

At lunchtime, Adam asked Jason, "What are you going to do about him?"

Jason exhaled. "I don't know. I'm hoping my friend has a solution. I don't want to send him to his death like your grandson."

"Of course. He seems bright. He loves that fire truck, doesn't he?"

A small smile emerged on Jason's face. "Yes, yes, he does." Shawn's green eyes had popped nearly out of his head when Jason showed him the real life model of his toy in the station. A guy in the station offered to show him around the truck, which really excited Shawn.

Adam had to smile too. "I hope he'll be fine."

In light of Shawn's behavior around Marta, Jason decided that he had a responsibility to teach his foster son some manners.

This idea started when Jason told Shawn through gestures to set the table. Shawn didn't understand, so Jason had to get out some silverware and show him where everything went. As he showed Shawn how the blade of the knife should face the plate, he also recalled his grandmother showing him how to do this when he was no older than Shawn.

Jason explained where everything went. Shawn seemed to absorb all of this very well with his talent for picking up visual information.

After they sat down for dinner and said a prayer, Jason asked Shawn, "What you tell me for this food?"

Shawn looked down at his plate, then back up at Jason. His eyes were blank. "Dunno."

"You tell me thank you." Jason had looked up the gesture beforehand. "You tell people thank you if they do something nice for you."

"Nice?" Shawn repeated the gesture. He hadn't seen it before.

"Nice means good. Something you like. Something helped you."

Shawn seemed to understand. "Thank you, Jason."

"You're welcome." Jason smiled. "You say you're welcome when people tell you thank you."

They finished their dinner. Shawn got down from his chair and walked towards the kitchen, but Jason grabbed his shoulder to make him stop. "Wait. What do you say?"

Shawn gestured, "More food," then pointed.

Jason shook his head. "More food, please." He put an emphasis on the gesture for please. "Polite."

"Please." Shawn repeated the gesture. "Why please?"

"You polite. Important polite, because people more nice to you that way."

"More food, please."

"Go ahead."

Jason encouraged Shawn to use "thank you" and "please" more to the point where Shawn got good at remembering it and would sometimes almost gesture it in public before Jason stopped him. They had to hide their gesturing when they were out in public, but it was okay when they were at home or at the firehouse.

Jason worked up the courage to call Marta. He could now make sure Shawn behaved himself.

When she picked up, Jason said, "I think I can explain about Shawn's situation to you now."

"What's up?" He could hear the interest in her voice.

Jason explained Shawn's hearing situation. "I think if CPS knew, they'd take him away and kill him." He then explained what had happened with Adam's grandson.

Marta listened. After he finished, she said, "Kill him? Are you sure?"

"That's what Adam said. He was so heartbroken..."

"Can we meet for dinner to discuss this?"

"When?"

"Tonight."

Jason arranged for Patrick to watch Shawn that night. After he came over, Jason showed him the book of hand language and what to do. Patrick said he'd do his best.

After he was ready, Jason walked to a downtown café where Marta was waiting for him. In contrast to his polo shirt and jeans, she was in a nice dress. Jason wished he'd worn something a little nicer.

But she welcomed him anyway. After they ordered, they chatted for a while.

Then she said, "About what happened to your friend's grandson... That's not what happens."

"It isn't?"

Their food arrived at that moment. Between bites, she told him that if people were found to have a disorder out of line with planetary standards, then an international law required that those people be given up to the authorities. Then those people were flown away to a planet, called Ray, which could care for them.

"Ray?" Jason echoed. "I've never heard of it."

"No. Communication between planets is expensive, so we can't have that for personal matters. It cuts down on costs if we tell them they're dead. As far as their families are concerned, they are."

Either way, the family would never see or talk to them again, so it didn't matter in the end. "So Shawn could live on Ray? Would he be okay there?"

"Yes. They have different places for each type of disorder. He'd be around other hearing-impaired people."

"Great. How can I get him there?"

She told him where the nearest dock was, an hour's drive away in the Inner Harbor. "The next launch won't be for another month, and the paperwork is tough. But I can get it done for you in time."

"Thank you." Jason bowed his head in gratitude. "This means so much."

Marta smiled her cat smile.

When Jason got home from dinner, Shawn rushed at him, hugging one of his legs and burying his face in Jason's body. Jason smiled at him then he asked Patrick, "How'd he behave?"

"He was good," Patrick said. "He played with his toys and I think I gestured with him okay."

"Thank you so much, seriously."

"No problem. Did Marta help?"

"She gave me a solution."

"That's good! Well, see you tomorrow, man." Patrick slapped Jason on the back before leaving and Jason looked down at Shawn.

Shawn unclamped himself from Jason's leg and asked with his hands, "What bad woman say?"

Jason had to restrain a sigh. "She not bad. She gave me help. Come on, I tell you."

After Shawn had retrieved the book of hand language, they sat down on the couch. Jason told him in careful gestures about what Marta told him.

Shawn gestured, scared, "Not hurt me?"

"No, not hurt you," Jason reassured him. "You want meet other deaf boys like you?"

Shawn thought. Then he asked with his hands, "Everyone there gesture too?"

"Not everyone."

Shawn's face fell.

"But I sure many, many people there gesture like you."

Shawn brightened up. "And not everyone slow like you?"

Jason had to laugh. "Sure, everyone there fast like you."

Shawn moved his hands in an imitation of fast gesturing, then he laughed so hard he fell over. Jason laughed along with him.

After they finished, Jason remembered something he meant to ask. He gestured, "You say nothing about father. You have one?"

"Father?" Shawn repeated the gesture, not understanding.

"Like mother, but man. Man who cares for you, loves you. That called father."

There was a long pause as Shawn pondered this. Then he pointed at Jason and gestured, "Father."

"Me?" Jason gestured. "Why?"

"You care for me. You love me. You my father."

Jason was stunned. He didn't know what to say. To think, he'd started out not wanting this kid to die. He'd given him much more. He gestured, "Me guess me your father."

Shawn made his hand into a gesture Jason didn't recognize.

"What that mean?" Jason asked with his hands, pointing to the strange gesture.

Shawn gestured, "Means me love you."

"That means me love you?" Jason copied the gesture and smiled.

As he put Shawn to bed, Jason was thinking. He got a lot more than he bargained for.

But the important thing was that Shawn was not going to die like his sisters, two dead children cremated in a church nursery. He was going to go live on a planet with other people like him. He was going to live. That was the important thing: that this innocent boy lived and didn't die.

During the next month, Marta got Shawn's paperwork in order while Jason worked on Shawn's education and kept him happy during their last month together.

Jason had been working with Shawn to try and find how much education he had. Shawn's sisters had taught him how to read, write a little and some basic arithmetic. So Jason got Shawn some workbooks meant for kids his age. If nothing was happening in the station, Jason would work with Shawn on those books.

One day, the boss stopped by. "You find anything for your boy?"

"Yes," Jason told him. "He'll be sent to a better place soon."

"That's good," his boss said, then chuckled. "We'll miss seeing him around here." Shawn got along very well with the other guys at the station. They often helped him with his workbooks when Jason wasn't available.

On the weekends, Jason took Shawn to some fun places. He apparently grew up locked away at home. Only his older brother could go out. So Shawn deserved to go to fun places and have some of the normal experiences of a five-year-old.

Jason took Shawn to an arcade, a local skating rink and the zoo. Shawn liked playing some of the games at the arcade. He loved the ones that involved throwing balls. He was terrified of the skating rink, holding onto Jason's hand the whole time. He was fascinated by the animals at the zoo since he'd never seen them before. Jason couldn't believe he never saw an animal before. What about books? Shawn had seen pictures of animals in books before, but didn't think they were real. He was also delighted by the petting zoo.

The day of the launch came up. Jason dressed Shawn up in some nice clothes and packed up all of his clothes into a suitcase, along with his fire truck and a few other toys. Then Jason drove him to Baltimore, where a spaceship was waiting to take Shawn and other disordered people to Ray.

The night before, Marta had called. The paperwork was cleared and that Shawn had his name on the list. She listed him as Shawn Wright, since CPS never found Shawn's real last name. All Jason had to do was show Shawn's ID and his own ID to the officers there. Marta had also hinted about her showing up, but Jason doubted it. Why bother? She had better things to do.

Jason arrived at the Inner Harbor, grateful that he gave himself extra time. He found a parking spot, paid for it, then helped Shawn get the suitcase out.

They walked to the small building labeled "Space Port" and waited in line. Shawn saw a small boy, younger than him, who was gesturing and gestured back to him. They struck up a conversation, but the small boy's mother saw it, slapped her son's hands and forced his head away.

Shawn looked up at Jason, a sad expression on his face. He dared a look back at the mother before asking with his hand, "Why?"

Jason didn't have an answer. He said in a raised voice, "I don't think she likes it."

"Why?"

"...people are stupid." After thinking about all the issues involved, that was the simplest answer Jason could give.

Shawn nodded and repeated with his hands, "People dumb."

Jason looked around. No Marta. Of course not. The line moved until they were standing in front of a window. An officer standing there said, "Show ID."

Jason showed him his own government ID and Shawn's state-issued child ID card. The officer took Shawn's card and studied it. "This says Shawn Doe, but my list says Shawn Wright."

"I'm his foster father. I thought it'd be easier for him to have my last name."

"Very well. He'll be registered as Shawn Wright on Ray. Please proceed to the right and close with him before sending him off." The officer gestured to the right, where Jason could see the entrance to the spaceship.

Jason walked Shawn there. Then he knelt down and said with a raised voice, "This last time I see you." They had discussed this before. Shawn had broken down about it, but he seemed to accept it, with much sniffling and tears. "I'm sorry I have to let you go, but I have to. You have to live and do great things." Then he gestured the one-handed strange gesture that meant, "I love you."

Shawn gestured, "I love you," with both hands. He hugged Jason, leaving tears on Jason's T-shirt. Then he picked up his suitcase and marched into the line, chin held up. Once he got there, he turned back and waved goodbye. Jason waved goodbye back and didn't leave until Shawn turned his back. This would be the last time they saw each other.

Jason walked back to his parking spot. He was thinking about his foster son and his sister's boys down in Tampa, and how those boys had never met but how they would get along great. He was thinking about Shawn's future and where Shawn could go someday. Shawn loved that fire truck so much... Maybe he could grow up to be a firefighter too.

His head was so full of thoughts that he didn't notice Marta, smiling her cat smile, standing in front of his car, flanked by two police officers, until it was too late.

Chapter XVIII: Reflections, VI

When Jason broke into the church nursery and found the boy there, Virgil had some questions. "What were you signing? Who were those kids?"

"*Hot*. Those were my sisters." After more unknown signs from his much-younger self, Shawn translated, "*Deaf too?*"

The young Shawn could hear Jason if he raised his voice, which prompted an eyebrow-raising from Virgil. "I thought you said you were born deaf?"

"That's my best guess. I could have started with a moderate hearing loss then lost more later on."

In the story, young Shawn told Jason that he was h-h, or hard-of-hearing. "So hard of hearing was a good thing?"

"When I was little, anything was better than total deafness."

Jason said good-bye to young Shawn in the story. "And that's the last time you saw him?"

"Yes. I remember waving goodbye to him. But there's more," Shawn signed.

"How do you know?"

"How? Talking with his adopted granddaughter, who cared for him at the end of his life."

At the end, Virgil asked Shawn, "Did this granddaughter contact you?"

"This granddaughter, named-what Megan, went to the expense of sending me a letter through intergalactic mail. I read it, when? I became twenty," Shawn signed. In the letter, Megan included articles about Jason's arrest, how he helped his foster son, and his

being fired from his library job due to his past. From the articles, Shawn pieced together what happened. Jason had been arrested for breaking an international law and then sentenced to prison for fifteen years. He got out early on good behavior. Ordinarily, he would have gotten out before ten years had passed, but the crime of going against the good and honorable thing to do for the world did not forgive lightly.

"Wait, that law about not reporting a…" Virgil had to think. "A disordered person. Really? We are, quote, disordered people, unquote?" He made quotation marks for "quote" and "unquote," quirking his eyebrows in disbelief.

"That was my home world," Shawn signed. He talked about Megan's first letter. She told him that her adopted grandfather, Shawn's foster father, died some years before, and she made it her goal to contact his dearly-remembered foster son. Shawn wrote back, saying that he remembered Jason very well and the things he taught him as a scared and lonely five-year-old.

Shawn felt bad about the length of his page-long letter when he received Megan's excited seven-page-long letter three weeks later. Through further correspondence with her, he would come to discover that this length was normal. They discussed Jason and what the other's planet was like.

Megan talked at length about her adventures in research for the college library that had the misfortune to employ a psychology-loving chatterbox obsessed with criminal cases. She told Shawn about countless cases identical to Jason's. There were people like Jason, who wanted to make sure abandoned children lived. There were people like Adam's son, who held onto their disordered children and were punished for it.

Shawn told her about how Eyeth was founded. Megan asked for more details of his life on Ray. After he told her, she sounded relieved. She wrote, "Grandfather was worried you didn't do well there. He wanted you to be happy."

Then Shawn realized she had access to resources on Old Earth he didn't. He asked her to look up Landon and Katherine Hall of Calverton, Maryland, sometime around the end of the twenty-first century. He vaguely remembered Landon Hall, his stepfather, and tried to research at one point to try to fill in the blanks, coming up with enough to verify remembered bits of information.

Megan, more than happy to oblige, sent him a long letter talking about his family with enclosed articles and pictures. The articles talking about his stepfather, a successful businessman and politician, never mentioned Shawn or his sisters. The sole article saying otherwise said that Landon married a woman with four children. In a correction, the editor said his wife's son was an only child. Shawn knew otherwise.

His older brother went on to play intergalactic basketball. No mention was made of him having any siblings.

In the photocopied pictures of his mother, she looked almost the same as he remembered from age three.

"Did she miss you?" Virgil signed. He knew his little sister missed him, but he wasn't so sure about his parents.

"I think she did." Shawn paused, lost in thought. Then he continued, "Megan told me Old Earth thought it cost too much to accommodate disordered people. When other planets were discovered, someone suggested that those disordered people be sent to

another planet to relieve Old Earth of its burden. Their planet was called Ray, from H. T. Rae, or the word Earth turned backwards."

"Burden? Us?" Virgil signed, his hands tense and almost shaking.

"That's how things happened there, long ago."

Virgil shook his head in disbelief. "All this time, I thought my deafness was a privilege."

"Depends on who you ask." Shawn couldn't hide a smile. "Here, on Eyeth, yes. On Old Earth, no."

This made sense to Virgil. His traveling philosophy was when he was in Laurent or Clarke, then he should do as the Clerkers or Lanners do as best as he could.

"A place where I was not accepted," Shawn signed. "Can you visualize that?"

Virgil shook his head no.

"That was my reality when I was small."

Virgil's blue eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "You're really over age three hundred."

"I'm very old. I'm very tired. I'm ready to be done." Though he said he was biologically in his late forties, his tired greenish-brown eyes looked much older than that. "I need you."

"For me to judge Eyeth." Virgil nodded, gray eyes serious. "I am a judge, and the world is my courtroom. You said that."

"Judge, consider your courtroom."

Eyeth. A world founded over three centuries ago for those who couldn't hear. It had many people of Old Earth stock, people descended from people who would have mocked them in times past. Yet those people, here on Eyeth, took a world and made it their own. They expanded their cultures and languages, experiencing the full range of humanity. During Shawn's time, their type was seen as "deficit". During Virgil's time, their type was seen as "normal". "We've changed. And?"

"You can dismiss that. Easy for you." Shawn looked outside at the green sky darkening with sunset. "I can't. I saw people like me become independent. They received a place of their own where they all stood on equal ground. They blossomed. It was both beautiful and frightening."

Virgil's nod of seeming agreement was a lie. To himself, he thought that deaf people were part of humanity all along. Yes, they were isolated before on Old Earth, but they still found each other. The book of gestures or signs Jason had in his possession testified to that. They made their own language on Old Earth. As soon as they could unite enough, they broke off and made a place of their own. They learned what it was like to be equal with each other to the same degree as the rest of humanity. That was all.

The true miracle of Zen Daniels was making all those deaf people agree on something. No wonder Virgil was curious about him as a young teenager. Now he was learning from the apprentice of Zen Daniels himself! But the apprentice was a disappointment, not succeeding as much as his teacher once had.

The young man swore to himself, exactly as another young man had done a few hundred years earlier, that he would seek unity for his world.

Shawn signed, apparently not noticing how deep in thought his student was, "...want everyone to have the same goal."

Virgil blinked. "Huh? What?"

"I want everyone to be happy with being deaf."

"Okay. Whatever you sign." Virgil didn't give a damn. Shawn had listened to his story of why he didn't accept that universal goal and didn't accept it. Virgil wouldn't accept the old man's goal either.

Shawn's eyebrows met. "You sure?"

"Yes. I'll unite the world, whatever makes you happy. But this job is for what? The world." Virgil then signed of what he wanted for the world. He wanted Clerc's problems to be resolved. He wanted people to be happy with themselves and their countries. He wanted the world to be at least content, if not totally at peace. Deafness was to be encouraged, but hearing people were also to be accepted.

"An attitude like that will result in what? A hearing world. The Council won't be happy with that." Shawn twisted one hand in the other.

"Why? We continued for over three hundred years and we've done well. We could continue for three thousand years without worrying about what will happen."

"We can't allow hearing people to dilute us." Shawn spoke of how deaf people on Old Earth feared hearing people's attempts to wipe them out. Each time hearing people introduced oral education, hearing aids and cochlear implants, deaf people were afraid for their culture. They made films of their signing to preserve it. They spoke out against hearing aids and cochlear implants in hope of keeping more people away from the

hearing monsters who wanted to destroy them. Then all of the deaf people on Old Earth were shipped off to Ray and their fears could cease.

"Back when Zen Daniels first had his big idea," Shawn signed to Virgil. "I was at a party for those who supported Eyeth. I talked to a scientist there who worked on deaf genetics. You know the Option?"

"I know about the Option," Virgil signed. "Gallians hate it."

"Back then, the Option wasn't made yet. This scientist told me he had the best genetic technology but still had concerns. He wanted to create a dominant deaf gene. If people had this gene, he thought, then the possibility of a baby on Eyeth who was born deaf would increase. But he had some people come to him to complain. They didn't want to force their children to be deaf."

Virgil rubbed his chin. "Huh? But how can you have a deaf world without deaf people?"

"That's why the scientist was concerned. After they created the Option, they had to figure out a way to make people want this Option." They consulted with someone from the newly renamed Council, who told them the best way was through propaganda. A campaign was then launched, which promoted the good of the planet and how people could best serve that good by creating more deaf citizens with the Option.

The campaign was well-received in Clerc, but less so in England and Milan. Protests broke out in Milan over the campaign, with people torching signs promoting the Option and waving pictures of ears while marching in the streets.

With Clerc's attempted takeover of the world came a forced acceptance of the Option. It took a century before the Option was accepted all over Americana. In the continents Clerc hadn't touched, like Europa and Oz, the Option was much less used than it was in Americana. Hearing people in those places were on the bottom rung of society and many figured out how to deafen or disguise themselves before reaching adulthood.

Virgil signed, "If that happened to me, maybe I would have done the same. Being deaf is a privilege."

"On Old Earth, being hearing is a privilege, but it's natural," Shawn signed.

"Being deaf is natural too," Virgil argued. "What about this situation?" If the Option was erased, the population would, over time, skew towards being hearing. Even with the hearing infants now existing, deaf children would still be born. Signing would remain as a language, but speaking wouldn't be as encouraged, passed on from their deaf ancestors. Both hearing and deaf people would live in harmony.

"That situation is impossible," Shawn signed. "The Council would never allow that situation to happen."

"Give me a hundred years, they will," Virgil signed with a wicked grin which soon faded. "It's not my job to interfere. I'm here to do what? Keep things in balance."

"Deaf people have always been afraid of disappearing forever."

"Not anymore." Virgil looked out the window, which now showed a forest green sky with a bright yellow crescent hanging low over the horizon and a few bright blue or

sparkling white stars scattered throughout. "This world isn't Old Earth, old man. We changed." Then he thought of something he once saw while wandering through Clerc.

During his travels, he was sitting in a bar, called the Broken Finger, in some tiny rural town, having a cold drink at one table while two women gossiped at another table.

A young woman, wearing much-patched clothes, stumbled through the entrance to the bar and went to the table with two men. "Please help me," she signed, and Virgil, eavesdropping, saw her signing wasn't perfect Ameslan "I lost everything…"

One of the women, the fat one, signed, "We told you, M, go-away." Virgil wasn't sure what the woman's name was, because she had a custom namesign. Within its flairs, it carried a very unpleasant connotation that signified a horrible woman, the type who would rather sit on a couch all day than help her husband.

The woman staggered over to Virgil's table. Virgil now noticed her severe limp. A cane would help, but the woman had none, only enlisting the help of her worn-out shoes with holey soles. The woman signed, her face pleading, "Please help. My husband died. I not get money…"

Virgil, low on funds, was already thinking about finding a temporary job. "Sorry, I'm broke."

The woman stumbled over to the bartender, who told her the same thing everyone else in the tavern had told her: no. The woman stumbled and limped her way out of the Broken Finger, disappointed.

After she was gone, the other woman at the table, the skinny one, turned to Virgil and smiled. "Good for you, boy."

Virgil jumped a little. "Good? Why? Who's that?"

"That's M-a-t-t-i-e. She's also known as, who, Mattie-the-bitch," the skinny woman signed, using the custom M namesign Virgil saw earlier. "Ignore-her, pfft! She's no good, NG."

The fat woman signed, "She's NG, why, she's a foreigner. She snuck-in, how? By marrying Ben and taking-advantage of him. Now that poor man's dead and that bitch's still here."

"Was he ill?" Virgil guessed. It was a logical assumption to make, seeing that they signed about taking advantage of someone who recently died.

"Yes. Bummer, Ben was a great catch." The fat woman looked at her companion. "Right? Tall, handsome, popular?"

"Oh yeah," the skinny woman confirmed. "Everyone didn't understand why he married some foreign woman."

"Maybe he pitied her?" the fat woman signed, a wide grin on her face. Both women threw their heads back in laughter.

Virgil read a book from his backpack until the two women left. Then he approached the bartender. "Hey, you need help around here?"

"I could use an errand boy," the bartender signed. "I sight-heard you were desperating-for money."

"Thank you!" Virgil shook hands with the bartender. They made an agreement that Virgil would stay for a week or two, depending on how much needed to be done. He would help with fetching things and cleaning.

A few days after the incident with Mattie, Virgil was cleaning the windows. He felt the wooden floorboards thump under his feet and turned around.

Putting down his cleaning cloth, he went over to the counter. "Wassup?"

The bartender looked around the place once more, making sure nobody else could see. Then he signed, "You remember M-a-t-t-i-e?"

Virgil thought it was strange that he spelled her name instead of signing it, but he nodded, remembering the limping young woman.

"Do me a favor, please. Out-back, there's, what, basket. Take basket to her house. Use our car."

"Why? I thought people didn't like her?"

"Well, something you have to understand..." The bartender explained:

A few years earlier, one of the town's most popular young men, a handsome fellow named Ben, went away to England on vacation. He brought back a pretty Englander girl and introduced her to people as his wife, which left many people in shock. The town girls who once fought for his hand in marriage now banded together to figure out how to separate Ben and his foreigner wife.

Not long after coming home, he fell ill. The townspeople forgot all about his foreigner wife and focused on Ben and his illness. His terminal illness lasted several years, and it was heartbreaking to watch a once athletic young man turn into a bedridden weakling who relied on his wife for all of his needs. The townspeople hated that he relied so much on his wife.

"I saw Ben before he became ill," the bartender told Virgil. "I could tell he loved her. It was love at first sight. But the townspeople, they didn't like that he married a foreigner when he could have married one of them."

"Those-two still love each-other after he became ill?"

They did, of course. Mattie would go out every day to find things her husband needed and to try to work. But she could never hold a job for more than two months at a time and people mocked her whenever she went into town. The couple struggled to live off of Ben's savings, what people gave them and what money Ben's family gave their son.

"M-a-t-t-i-e loved him and she was willing to come-with-him to Clerc. But she struggled with Ameslan and people taunted her for signing English. After Ben died, a car hit M-a-t-t-i-e. They had to override the car's system to do that."

Virgil scowled. "I thought they should have been nicer to Mattie. She was married to someone popular."

"They didn't like how she wasn't one of them. That driver of that car broke her leg, but she couldn't afford to fix it up right." The bartender looked around out of wistfulness. "She came-here after the accident, said she needed something to help with her pain. I knew Ben well. I helped her. I'm sorry I couldn't help Ben."

Virgil looked out back. A large basket sat there, covered with a blanket. It had a note on it, with Mattie written out at the top in Anglo letters.

He signed, "I'll go."

"Tell her I signed hi," the bartender signed and went back to work.

Virgil loaded the basket into the anti-grav car used for errands. In the auto-driving system stacked below the videophone screen, he found the address labeled, "Ben & Mattie," punched it in and let the car take off.

The car arrived at a small blue house. Virgil got out, carrying the basket. He pressed the doorbell. Through the windows to the right of the door, he could see lights flashing in the house. The young woman he had seen a few days earlier peeked through the windows at him. Virgil waved, then pointed to the basket on his right arm.

She opened the door a crack. Virgil signed, "This is from the bartender at the Broken Finger."

"Oh, it is from Scotty," she signed in English, her face lighting up with gratitude. She took the basket from him. "Come in."

The bartender wouldn't expect Virgil back for some time. He entered the house, looking around.

It was small, typical for a young couple's first house. Once upon a time, Ben had bought this house for himself and his bride, expecting happiness. Now the woman he loved had to deal with his unkind town.

Virgil sat down in the living room, not sure what to do, while Mattie took the basket to the kitchen. He looked around. The couch he was sitting on was nice for this house. How did Ben afford it? Come to think of it, other things in this house were very nice too, like a few expensive-looking paintings on the walls here and there.

When Mattie returned, Virgil asked about the paintings.

She wiped away a tear. "Those paintings were Ben's. I do not want to throw-them-out… they remind me of him."

To Virgil, keeping reminders of dead people didn't seem like a good thing. To each their own. He signed, "Why do you not sell one or two? I'm sure that would help."

"I cannot. Ben's family would get upset with me."

Poor her, having to deal with so much. "Can you go home? That seems better than staying."

"I was kicked-out. I do not have anyone back home… or here." She took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her nose.

Virgil waited until she was composed, then he signed, "You have Scotty. He helped you." He pointed to the basket in the kitchen.

"Only him and a few others."

He chatted with her that afternoon, feeling sorry for her. She seemed lonely, and she had been there that day to pick up her basket, but panicked when she saw two town women and forgot. Virgil guessed she had made a habit of begging, and was polite enough not to ask.

At one point, he asked her, "Have you sight-heard of Pegasus?"

"I always wanted to visit."

"I think my good friend there can help you." Virgil dug in his cargo pants pockets, producing a pad of paper and a stub of pencil. On the paper, he wrote down a videophone number starting with a Pegasus country code. He tore off the paper then handed it to Mattie. "This is Royal. Call-him this evening, tell him about what happened."

Mattie took the paper, her hands trembling. "Are you sure?"

"I trust Royal." Virgil gave her a reassuring smile.

They parted, with her promising to call if Royal came through.

Virgil concluded from Mattie's treatment that Clerkers were so isolated that they couldn't even help those who were outsiders. As Shawn had testified, Clerkers helped their own kind. But they were the same as they had been on Old Earth: so afraid of disappearing that they kept their communities tightknit, refusing to let in or help anyone else. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Yes, Shawn remembered the fear of having his world wiped out. But what he believed was outdated. Virgil wouldn't bother with those outdated things. However, he would remember not to screw up like Shawn had..

Virgil signed, "I will help Eyeth. I'll serve as the Guardian. First, can I get some time off? I want to see Royal like I meant to."

Chapter XIX: Return from the Underworld

After Virgil disembarked the jet with his bag, he was met by a small hovership, which took him to Mace, Pegasus. It landed in Royal's street, and Virgil got out. After the hovership was out of sight, Virgil walked into the apartment building. He greeted the doorman, who told him, "Royal moved to the fifth floor. He wanted to expand."

"What's he doing now?"

"I don't know."

Virgil took the elevator up to the fifth floor and then he went to 706A. He pressed the doorlight. Through the tiny square window above the door, he could see lights flashing.

A tall chunk of a man answered the door. "You—oh my God." His hands froze at the sight of Virgil. "Gil! What happened to you, man? I tried to contact you for over two months!"

Virgil hugged him tightly. "Good to see you, Royal. I was whoa! busy with job training. What happened with your place?"

They went inside the apartment to the living room, which was filled with the wreck from demolition. Royal settled his bulk into an armchair. "I wanted to expand, but I cannot go further. I cannot afford-it. What job?"

Virgil perched on the couch. "It's crazy… This guy kidnapped me, told me that he was the Guardian and that he wanted me to take over."

Royal's eyes narrowed. "Gil, are you serious? You sure you did not get recruited into one of those crazy cults? The Guardian's not real. He's some old story from long ago!"

"Shut up! I met the guy!"

"I am telling you, you could have met some crazy cult leader. How do you know he was the real deal?"

"He told me about Zen Daniels. Stuff nobody else knows."

Royal fell silent. He had tried to help Virgil once in his quest for Daniels, years ago, but found that this Daniels guy did nothing significant other than start up Eyeth, so not much was out there about him. Even a crazy cult leader wouldn't bother with Daniels.

"...this Guardian, he really will let you take over the world? And you talked about that a lot too."

"I never thought I would get to do it!"

Royal pressed a finger to the black band on his wrist, and the time popped up in a holo-display. "Hey, do you want to go-out to dinner? There's this great new fusion place."

"Sure! I can tell you more over dinner."

"...really three hundred years old!" Virgil signed to Royal two hours later in Fukara Grill.

"No shit?" Royal raised an eyebrow, wiping the last of some egg dish from his goatee.

"No shit. He's been around since the beginning! And I'm supposed to follow in his 'legacy.'" Virgil rolled his eyes.

"Wow. You think you can do it?"

"Yeah. But I need some help. Do you think—"

"Just say the word." Royal held up a meaty hand. "I'm here to help."

"Thank you so much! Hey, how's Mattie doing?"

Royal blinked. "Oh! Her! Yeah, she's still doing great now. Remember, we visited that flower place where she works last time you were here?"

"Oh yeah, I remember! She gave me a free flower."

"She's still there, and her manager wants to train her to take over another flower place. Last time I ran into Mattie, she told me she went on a date with some guy the week before."

"Glad she recovered, but I am sure she still remembers Ben."

"I know she does. She still has a lot of his paintings, had to sneak them out of Clerc. Speaking of Clerc, you totally blew that McLean identity."

"I heard about that. What happened?"

"When they found the real Nate in Ballard, they arrested him for treason. This was around four-months ago. They questioned him, talked to Keith, but they realized that Nate wasn't their man. So they found me somehow. Sorry, Gil. I had to tell them about you. They were threatening to shut-down my operation."

"That would stop you?" Virgil had to shake his head, laughing.

Royal was dead serious. "This is the Clerker police force we're talking about here. They're allies with Pegasus, remember? They tracked me down and threw questions at me."

"I'm so sorry you went through that." Virgil ground a fist into his forehead, wincing.

"It's cool, man. They agreed to let my operation slide once they caught you." Royal shrugged. "You gave me protection. After I finally gave-up, I told-them you were on your way here."

"And they found me." Virgil exhaled. "But I got a sweet job out of that." He had to smile at the irony.

"But that's not the only time I had to talk on your behalf, though."

"When else?"

"We better go outside for this."

Later, as they sat on Royal's balcony, he told Virgil:

"A year and a half ago, I was walking through the mall, then I got pulled into this eddy between stores by this tall scary guy wearing all black. This guy told me he was all-the-way from Poccener, and he wanted to know where someone named Agent G was. I told him I had no idea who that was and he showed me a picture. Wow, Gil, you looked so cute when you were younger."

"Shut up." Virgil turned red and kicked him in the shin.

"This guy, he said his name was Pyotr, he said that you used to work for his organization as a guard then left after you broke your hand. His organization wanted to find you again."

"They wanted to find me?" Virgil's jaw was open in shock.

"They wanted you back! I dunno what you did, but he said they would forgive you. They saw you as valuable."

"Valuable? True-business?" Virgil had to smile, shaking his head. "They were the first to accept me."

"Why did you not tell-me that story?" Royal couldn't believe it. "You have tons of other interesting stories too!"

"I don't-like to talk about that."

"Why not?"

"I got blood on my hands."

Royal frowned, then he shrugged. "Ivan said he wanted you to go talk to them."

Virgil considered it. "Maybe I should go talk to them, have them work with me for this new job."

"They seem valuable. He was talking about how his organization protected people from tyranny, whatever that means."

"That seems like something an advisor would say."

"You wanted me to help out. But it will be hard helping you out if I do not see you that often." Royal looked disappointed.

"Tell you what. I have some accumulated pay I can use for your salary. For that money, you help me out with this whole Guardian thing. What do you think?" Virgil spat on his hand then stuck it out.

"I wanted to finish expanding... Deal!" He also spat on his hand and shook Virgil's hand. "Do not be a stranger, all right?"

"Great," Virgil had a sad smile on. "Sorry. I will only see you once every ten years."

"I hoped you could come here, be a permanent Gasser. I guess it couldn't have worked, with all the trouble you keep getting in." Then he picked Virgil up in a huge bear hug. "We still cool."

They put their hands together, slid them away into thumbs-ups, their handshake, and smiled at each other.

They talked more, then Virgil told Royal, "One day, I will come on down and summon you. Then you can check out my sweet palace."

"Palace?! Serious?"

"Would I joke?" Virgil grinned and Royal punched him. They hugged a last goodbye before the hovercraft came to take Virgil away.

After he left, he would go on to travel the continents of Europa, Thudimi, Oz, Bara, Amécen, and Hartelo with Shawn.

Chapter XX: The Crowning

Almost a year after Virgil woke up in a Zonia holding room, he was standing in the throne room with Shawn and most of the officials from the Council.

He was chatting with one Gallian official in Common Sign when Shawn approached him. "Excuse me," Shawn signed. "My student needs to come with me for a briefing."

The official smiled and bowed goodbye. Virgil bowed before going with Shawn.

At the back of the throne room, Shawn pushed aside a curtain . They went through to a small room that had a binder sitting on a table.

"Why do I have to wake up on my birthday?" Virgil signed.

"Easier," Shawn signed. "We need to discuss some things."

Virgil remembered their discussions over the last few months about what the second Guardian of Eyeth would do. He flipped the binder open. The opening page was labeled, in American English and Ameslan, "Two-Hundred Year Plan." Both signatures were below the title, but only Virgil's was in both alphabets. Virgil closed it and knocked the cover before signing, "After the plan's done, the dissolving begins, right?"

"Yes. This binder was in my possession while I was Guardian. After you receive the crown, everything I own as the Guardian becomes yours. That includes what? The palace plus pay that will accumulate without sleep."

"What will you do without that pay?"

"The Council will pay me a pension from my unused pay. Don't worry, you'll have plenty of money. After this is over, I won't see you again."

"What if I need help?" Virgil grabbed Shawn's upper arms. "What if I need advice?"

"I'm done with helping Eyeth. You got more help than me." Shawn looked towards the green curtain before looking back at Virgil. "From-here-on, you're on your own."

They went through the green curtain and took their positions at the back on the stage set up in the throne room. Shawn put on the Guardian's crown, which was used only for special ceremonies. The simple gold crown was made of a copper and aluminum alloy. He and Virgil both wore the special blue Guardian robes.

The leader of the Council came to the podium and signed a short opening speech. A mirror suspended from the ceiling made what he signed easy to view for Virgil and Shawn. Then the leader welcomed Shawn to the podium.

Shawn stepped up to the podium. In the mirror, Virgil watched Shawn sign about how he found this once-angry young man through a letter written to Clerc. Then his people tracked him down and brought him to the palace. Shawn signed that he knew Virgil would resist if asked. Virgil nodded, hating to admit it, but he did agree. If someone came to him a year ago, telling him about a job where he'd be awake a year out of every ten and make money as he slept, Virgil would have dismissed him as crazy. Today, he wanted to do this crazy job.

Shawn spread out his arms in a speaker's gesture. "I now bring Virgil G to the stage. Come forward!"

Virgil came to the podium. He stood at Shawn's left, facing the audience.

Shawn signed, "I now step down from my position as Guardian. I served Eyeth for many years, but I feel my time is finished." He took off the Guardian's crown and laid it

on the podium. Then they turned to face each other. Shawn signed, "I, Shawn Wright, now pass-down the duty of Guardian of Eyeth to you, Virgil G." He picked up the crown.

Virgil signed, "I, Virgil G, now accept the duty of Guardian of Eyeth as passed-down by you, Shawn Wright." He closed his eyes, bowed his head and Shawn placed the crown onto his curly dark head. The floor thundered with the Council officials' applause.

The new Guardian opened his eyes and looked at his audience. He stepped down from the stage and walked up to the dais with the throne chair sitting on it. After sitting down in his chair, he regarded the world, his courtroom for the next however many years it would take to bring the world back to balance and dissolve his position. He hoped he would be the last Guardian. "Now I begin."

The day before his twenty-second birthday, Virgil was taken to the cryosleep headquarters. Only the most elite in the galaxy, including a few on Eyeth, knew of this place, which was located on a remote island in the Ramic Ocean west of Americana.

An attendant there led him through the process. Then, right before he lay down and slept for nine years, Virgil asked, "Will things be all right?"

"I can't say," the attendant signed. He closed the hard clear plastic cover and locked it into position, ensuring it wouldn't open for nine years.